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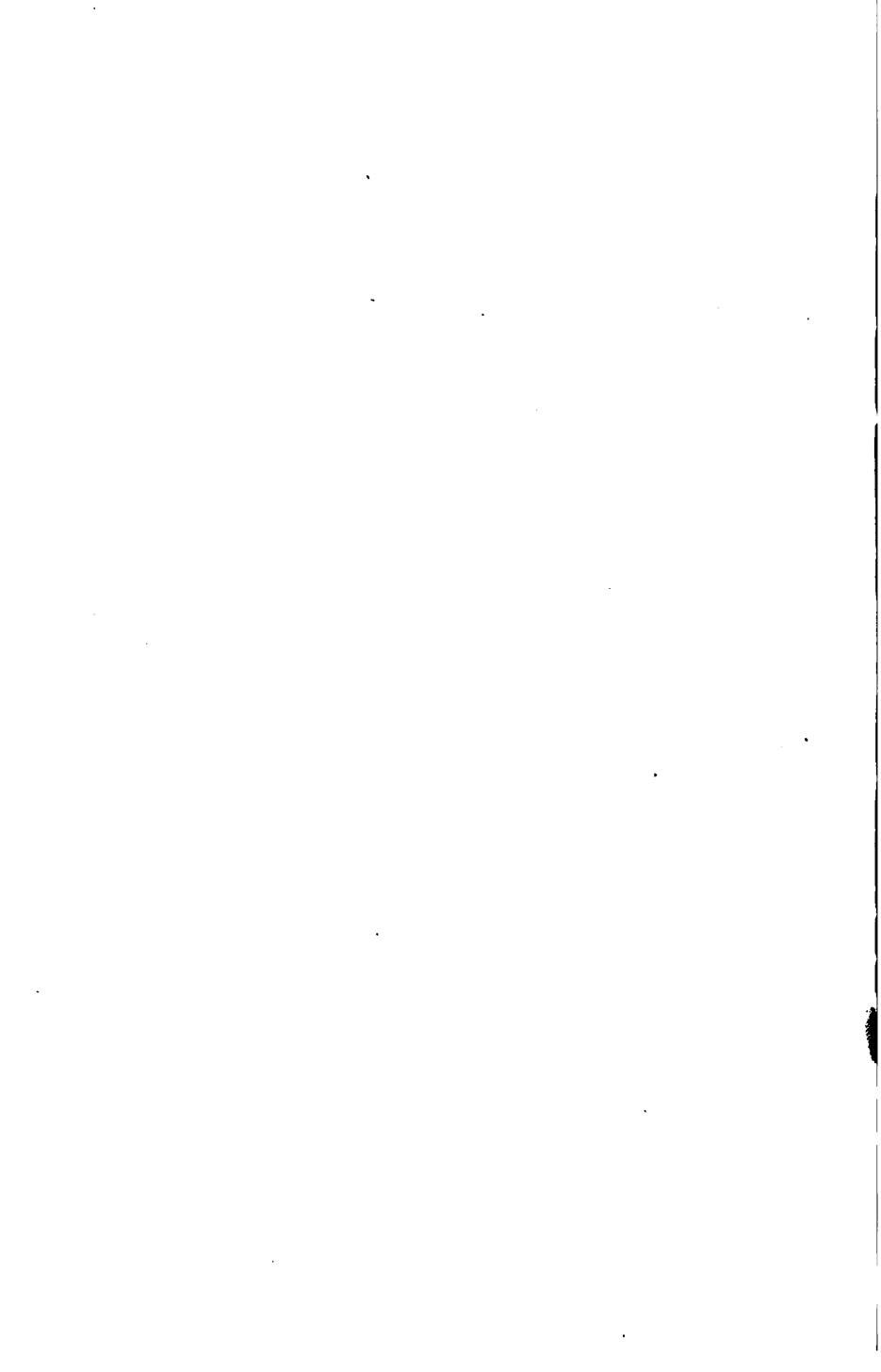
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BORN IN EXILE

VOL. III



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BORN IN EXILE

A Novel

BY

GEORGE GISSING

AUTHOR OF

'NEW GRUB STREET,' 'DENZIL QUARRIER,' ETC.

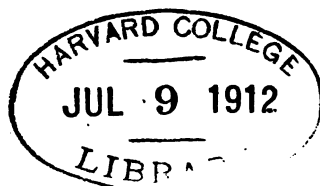
IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III

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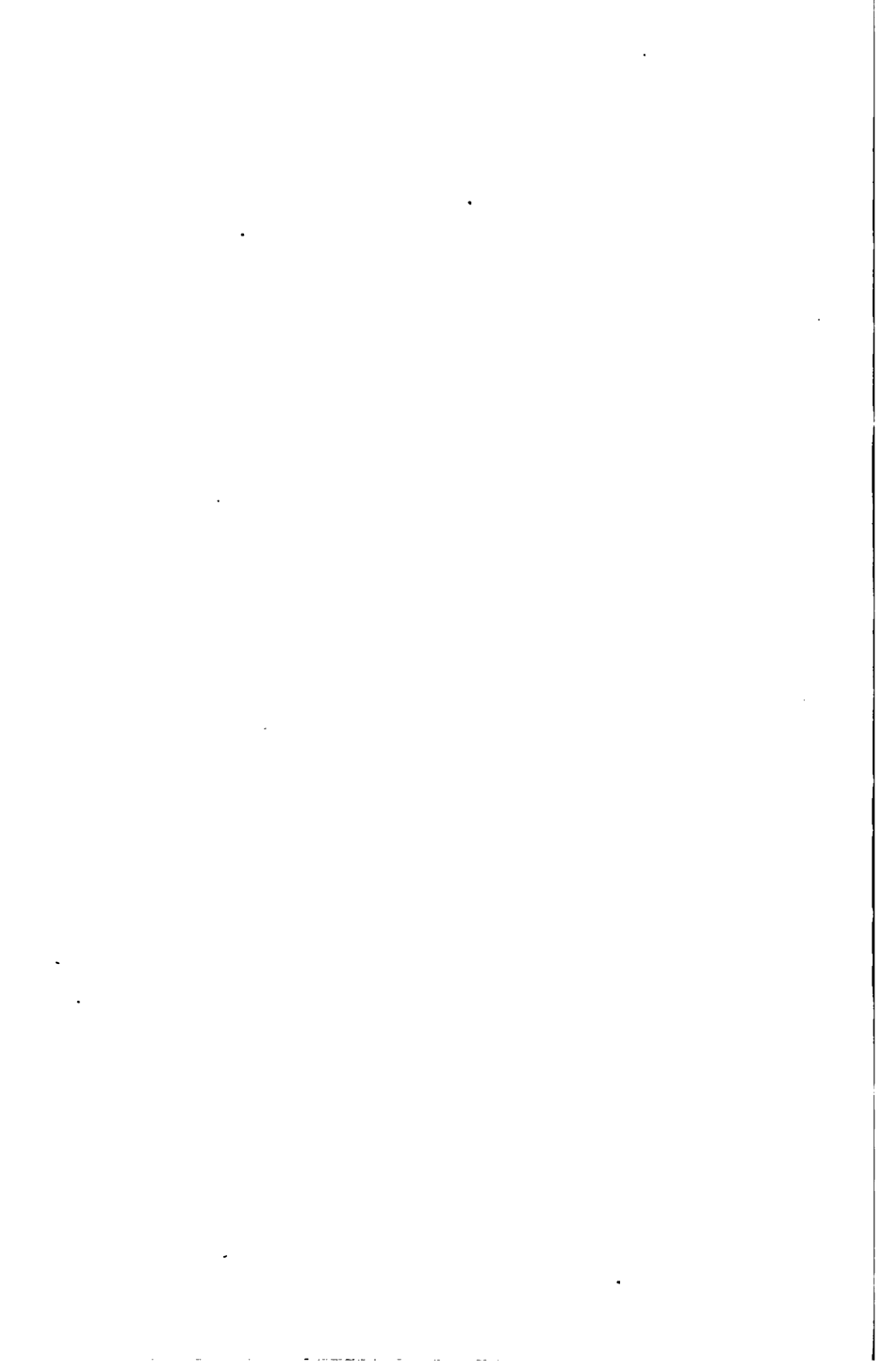
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PART THE FIFTH



BORN IN EXILE



PART THE FIFTH

I

THE cuckoo clock in Mrs. Roots's kitchen had just struck three. A wind roared from the north-east, and light thickened beneath a sky which made threat of snow. Peak was in a mood to enjoy the crackling fire; he settled himself with a book in his easy-chair, and thought with pleasure of two hours' reading, before the appearance of the homely teapot.

Christmas was just over—one cause of the feeling of relief and quietness which possessed him. No one had invited him for Christmas Eve or the day that followed, and he did not regret it. The letter he had received from Martin Warricombe was assurance enough that

those he desired to remember him still did so. He had thought of using this season for his long postponed visit to Twybridge, but reluctance prevailed. All popular holidays irritated and depressed him; he loathed the spectacle of multitudes in Sunday garb. It was all over, and the sense of that afforded him a brief content.

This book, which he had just brought from the circulating library, was altogether to his taste. The author, Justin Walsh, he knew to be a brother of Professor Walsh, long ago the object of his rebellious admiration. Matter and treatment rejoiced him. No intellectual delight, though he was capable of it in many forms, so stirred his spirit as that afforded him by a vigorous modern writer joyously assailing the old moralities. Justin Walsh was a modern of the moderns; at once man of science and man of letters; defiant without a hint of popular cynicism, scornful of English reticences yet never gross. '*Oui, répondit Pocourante, il est beau d'écrire ce qu'on pense; c'est le privilège de l'homme.*' This stood by way of motto on the title-page, and Godwin felt his nerves thrill in sympathetic response.

What a fine fellow he must be to have for a friend! Now a man like this surely had companionship enough

and of the kind he wished? He wrote like one who associates freely with the educated classes both at home and abroad. Was he married? Where would *he* seek his wife? The fitting mate for him would doubtless be found among those women, cosmopolitan and emancipated, whose acquaintance falls only to men in easy circumstances and of good social standing, men who travel much, who are at home in all the great centres of civilisation.

As Peak meditated, the volume fell upon his knee. Had it not lain in his own power to win a reputation like that which Justin Walsh was achieving? His paper in *The Critical Review*, itself a decided success, might have been followed up by others of the same tenor. Instead of mouldering in a dull cathedral town, he might now be living and working in France or Germany. His money would have served one purpose as well as the other, and two or three years of determined effort——

Mrs. Roots showed her face at the door.

‘A gentleman is asking for you, sir,—Mr. Chilvers.’

‘Mr. Chilvers? Please ask him to come up.’

He threw his book on to the table, and stood in expectancy. Someone ascended the stairs with rapid stride and creaking boots. The door was flung open,

and a cordial but affected voice burst forth in greeting.

‘Ha, Mr. Peak! I hope you haven’t altogether forgotten me? Delighted to see you again!’

Godwin gave his hand, and felt it strongly pressed, whilst Chilvers gazed into his face with a smiling wistfulness which could only be answered with a grin of discomfort. The Rev. Bruno had grown very tall, and seemed to be in perfect health; but the effeminacy of his brilliant youth still declared itself in his attitudes, gestures, and attire. He was dressed with marked avoidance of the professional pattern. A hat of soft felt but not clerical, fashionable collar and tie, a sweeping ulster, and beneath it a frock-coat, which was doubtless the pride of some West End tailor. His patent-leather boots were dandiacally diminutive; his glove fitted like that of a lady who lives but to be *bien gantée*. The feathery hair, which at Whitelaw he was wont to pat and smooth, still had its golden shimmer, and on his face no growth was permitted.

‘I had heard of your arrival here, of course,’ said Peak, trying to appear civil, though anything more than that was beyond his power. ‘Will you sit down?’

'This is the "breathing time o' the day" with you, I hope? I don't disturb your work?'

'I was only reading this book of Walsh's. Do you know it?'

But for some such relief of his feelings, Godwin could not have sat still. There was a pleasure in uttering Walsh's name. Moreover, it would serve as a test of Chilvers' disposition.

'Walsh?' He took up the volume. 'Ha! Justin Walsh. I know him. A wonderful book! Admirable dialectic! Delicious style!'

'Not quite orthodox, I fancy,' replied Godwin, with a curling of the lips.

'Orthodox? Oh, of course not, of course not! But a rich vein of humanity. Don't you find that?—Pray allow me to throw off my overcoat. Ha, thanks!—A rich vein of humanity. Walsh is by no means to be confused with the nullifidians. A very broad-hearted, large-souled man; at bottom the truest of Christians. Now and then he effervesces rather too exuberantly. Yes, I admit it. In a review of his last book, which I was privileged to write for one of our papers, I ventured to urge upon him the necessity of *restraint*; it seems to me that in this new work he exhibits more self-control,

an approach to the serene fortitude which I trust he may attain. A man of the broadest brotherliness. A most valuable ally of renascent Christianity.'

Peak was hardly prepared for this strain. He knew that Chilvers prided himself on 'breadth,' but as yet he had enjoyed no intercourse with the broadest school of Anglicans, and was uncertain as to the limits of modern latitudinarianism. The discovery of such fantastic liberality in a man whom he could not but dislike and condemn gave him no pleasure, but at least it disposed him to amusement rather than antagonism. Chilvers' pronunciation and phraseology were distinguished by such original affectation that it was impossible not to find entertainment in listening to him. Though his voice was naturally thin and piping, he managed to speak in head notes which had a ring of robust utterance. The sound of his words was intended to correspond with their virile warmth of meaning. In the same way he had cultivated a habit of the muscles which conveyed an impression that he was devoted to athletic sports. His arms occasionally swung as if brandishing dumb-bells, his chest now and then spread itself to the uttermost, and his head was often thrown back in an attitude suggesting self-defence.

‘So you are about to join us,’ he exclaimed, with a look of touching interest, much like that of a ladies’ doctor speaking delicately of favourable symptoms. Then, as if consciously returning to the virile note, ‘I think we shall understand each other. I am always eager to study the opinions of those among us who have scientific minds. I hear of you on all hands; already you have strongly impressed some of the thinking people in Exeter.’

Peak crossed his legs and made no reply.

‘There is distinct need of an infusion of the scientific spirit into the work of the Church. The churchman hitherto has been, as a matter of course, of the literary stamp; hence much of our trouble during the last half-century. It behoves us to go in for science—physical, economic—science of every kind. Only thus can we resist the morbid influences which inevitably beset an Established Church in times such as these. I say it boldly. Let us throw aside our Hebrew and our Greek, our commentators ancient and modern! Let us have done with polemics and with compromises! What we have to do is to construct a spiritual edifice on the basis of scientific revelation. I use the word revelation advisedly. The results of science are the divine message to our age;

to neglect them, to fear them, is to remain under the old law whilst the new is demanding our adherence, to repeat the Jewish error of bygone time. Less of St. Paul, and more of Darwin! Less of Luther, and more of Herbert Spencer!’

‘Shall I have the pleasure of hearing this doctrine at St. Margaret’s?’ Peak inquired.

‘In a form suitable to the intelligence of my parishioners, taken in the mass. Were my hands perfectly free, I should begin by preaching a series of sermons on *The Origin of Species*. Sermons! An obnoxious word! One ought never to use it. It signifies everything inept, inert.’

‘Is it your serious belief, then, that the mass of parishioners—here or elsewhere—are ready for this form of spiritual instruction?’

‘Most distinctly—given the true capacity in the teacher. Mark me; I don’t say that they are capable of receiving much absolute knowledge. What I desire is that their minds shall be relieved from a state of harassing conflict—put at the right point of view. They are not to think that Jesus of Nazareth teaches faith and conduct incompatible with the doctrines of Evolutionism. They are not to spend their lives in kicking against the

pricks, and regard as meritorious the punctures which result to them. The establishment in their minds of a few cardinal facts—that is the first step. Then let the interpretation follow—the solace, the encouragement, the hope for eternity!’

‘You imagine,’ said Godwin, with a calm air, ‘that the mind of the average church-goer is seriously disturbed on questions of faith?’

‘How can you ignore it, my dear Peak?—Permit me this familiarity; we are old fellow-collegians.—The average church-goer is the average citizen of our English commonwealth,—a man necessarily aware of the great Radical movement, and all that it involves. Forgive me. There has been far too much blinking of actualities by zealous Christians whose faith is rooted in knowledge. We gain nothing by it; we lose immensely. Let us recognise that our churches are filled with sceptics, endeavouring to believe in spite of themselves.’

‘Your experience is much larger than mine,’ remarked the listener, submissively.

‘Indeed I have widely studied the subject.’

Chilvers smiled with ineffable self-content, his head twisted like that of a sagacious parrot.

‘Granting your average citizen,’ said the other, ‘what

about the average citizeness? The female church-goers are not insignificant in number.'

'Ha! There we reach the core of the matter! Woman! woman! Precisely *there* is the most hopeful outlook. I trust you are strong for female emancipation?'

'Oh, perfectly sound on that question!'

'To be sure! Then it must be obvious to you that women are destined to play the leading part in our Christian renaissance, precisely as they did in the original spreading of the faith. What else is the meaning of the vast activity in female education? Let them be taught, and forthwith they will rally to our Broad Church. A man may be content to remain a nullifidian; women cannot rest at that stage. They demand the spiritual significance of everything.—I grieve to tell you, Peak, that for three years I have been a widower. My wife died with shocking suddenness, leaving me her two little children. Ah, but leaving me also the memory of a singularly pure and noble being. I may say, with all humility, that I have studied the female mind in its noblest modern type. I *know* what can be expected of woman, in our day and in the future.'

‘Mrs. Chilvers was in full sympathy with your views?’

‘Three years ago I had not yet reached my present standpoint. In several directions I was still narrow. But her prime characteristic was the tendency to spiritual growth. She would have accompanied me step by step. In very many respects, I must regard myself as a man favoured by fortune,—I know it, and I trust I am grateful for it,—but that loss, my dear Peak, counterbalances much happiness. In moments of repose, when I look back on work joyously achieved, I often murmur to myself, with a sudden sigh, *Excepto quod non simul esses, cætera lætus!*’

He pronounced his Latin in the new-old way, with Continental vowels. The effect of this on an Englishman’s lips is always more or less pedantic, and in his case it was intolerable.

‘And when,’ he exclaimed, dismissing the melancholy thought, ‘do you present yourself for ordination?’

It was his habit to pay slight attention to the words of anyone but himself, and Peak’s careless answer merely led him to talk on wide subjects with renewal of energy. One might have suspected that he had made a list of uncommon words wherewith to adorn his discourse, for

certain of these frequently recurred. 'Nullifidian,' 'morbific,' 'renascent,' were among his favourites. Once or twice he spoke of 'psychogenesis,' with an emphatic enunciation which seemed to invite respectful wonder. In using Latin words which have become fixed in the English language, he generally corrected the common errors of quantity: '*minnus* the spiritual fervour,' 'acting as his *loccum tennens*.' When he referred to Christian teachers with whom he was acquainted, they were seldom or never members of the Church of England. Methodists, Romanists, Presbyterians, appeared to stand high in his favour, and Peak readily discerned that this was a way of displaying 'large-souled tolerance.' It was his foible to quote foreign languages, especially passages which came from heretical authors. Thus, he began to talk of Feuerbach for the sole purpose of delivering a German sentence.

'He has been of infinite value to me—quite infinite value. You remember his definition of God? It is constantly in my mind. "*Gott ist eine Thräne der Liebe, in tiefster Verborgenheit vergossen über das menschliche Elend.*" Profoundly touching! I know nothing to approach it.'

Suddenly he inquired:

‘Do you see much of the Exeter clergy?’

‘I know only the Vicar of St. Ethelreda’s, Mr. Lilywhite.’

‘Ha! Admirable fellow! Large-minded, broad of sympathies. Has distinctly the scientific turn of thought.’

Peak smiled, knowing the truth. But he had hit upon a way of meeting the Rev. Bruno which promised greatly to diminish the suffering inherent in the situation. He would use the large-souled man deliberately for his mirth. Chilvers’ self-absorption lent itself to persiflage, and by indulging in that mood Godwin tasted some compensation for the part he had to play.

‘And I believe you know the Warricombes very well?’ pursued Chilvers.

‘Yes.’

‘Ha! I hope to see much of them. They are people after my own heart. Long ago I had a slight acquaintance with them. I hear we shan’t see them till the summer.’

‘I believe not.’

‘Mr. Warricombe is a great geologist, I think?—Probably he frequents public worship as a mere tribute to social opinion?’

He asked the question in the airiest possible way, as if it mattered nothing to him what the reply might be.

'Mr. Warricombe is a man of sincere piety,' Godwin answered, with grave countenance.

'That by no means necessitates church-going, my dear Peak,' rejoined the other, waving his hand.

'You think not? I am still only a student, you must remember. My mind is in suspense on not a few points.'

'Of course! Of course! Pray let me give you the results of my own thought on this subject.'

He proceeded to do so, at some length. When he had rounded his last period, he unexpectedly started up, swung on his toes, spread his chest, drew a deep breath, and with the sweetest of smiles announced that he must postpone the delight of further conversation.

'You must come and dine with me as soon as my house is in reasonable order. As yet, everything is *sens dessus-dessous*. Delightful old city, Exeter! Charming! Charming!'

And on the moment he was gone.

What were this man's real opinions? He had brains and literature; his pose before the world was not that of

an ignorant charlatan. Vanity, no doubt, was his prime motive, but did it operate to make a cleric of a secret materialist, or to incite a display of excessive liberalism in one whose convictions were orthodox? Godwin could not answer to his satisfaction, but he preferred the latter surmise.

One thing, however, became clear to him. All his conscientious scruples about entering the Church were superfluous. Chilvers would have smiled pityingly at anyone who disputed his right to live by the Establishment, and to stand up as an authorised preacher of the national faith. And beyond a doubt he regulated his degree of 'breadth' by standards familiar to him in professional intercourse. To him it seemed all-sufficient to preach a gospel of moral progress, of intellectual growth, of universal fraternity. If this were the tendency of Anglicanism, then almost any man who desired to live a cleanly life, and to see others do the same, might without hesitation become a clergyman. The old formulæ of subscription were so symbolised, so volatilised, that they could not stand in the way of anyone but a combative nihilist. Peak was conscious of positive ideals by no means inconsistent with Christian teaching, and in his official capacity these alone would direct him.

He spent his evening pleasantly, often laughing as he recalled a phrase or gesture of the Rev. Bruno's.

In the night fell a sprinkling of snow, and when the sun rose it gleamed from a sky of pale, frosty blue. At ten o'clock Godwin set out for his usual walk, choosing the direction of the Old Tiverton Road. It was a fortnight since he had passed the Warricombes' house. At present he was disposed to indulge the thoughts which a sight of it would make active.

He had begun the ascent of the hill when the sound of an approaching vehicle caused him to raise his eyes—they were generally fixed on the ground when he walked alone. It was only a hired fly. But, as it passed him, he recognised the face he had least expected to see,—Sidwell Warricombe sat in the carriage, and unaccompanied. She noticed him—smiled—and bent forward. He clutched at his hat, but it happened that the driver had turned to look at him, and, instead of the salute he had intended, his hand waved to the man to stop. The gesture was scarcely voluntary; when he saw the carriage pull up, his heart sank; he felt guilty of monstrous impudence. But Sidwell's face appeared at the window, and its expression was anything but resentful; she offered her

hand, too. Without preface of formal phrase he exclaimed:

‘How delightful to see you so unexpectedly! Are you all here?’

‘Only mother and I. We have come for a day or two.’

‘Will you allow me to call? If only for a few minutes’——

‘We shall be at home this afternoon.’

‘Thank you! Don’t you enjoy the sunshine after London?’

‘Indeed I do!’

He stepped back and signed to the driver. Sidwell bent her head and was out of sight.

But the carriage was visible for some distance, and even when he could no longer see it he heard the horse’s hoofs on the hard road. Long after the last sound had died away his heart continued to beat painfully, and he breathed as if recovering from a hard run.

How beautiful were these lanes and hills, even in mid-winter! Once more he sang aloud in his joyous solitude. The hope he had nourished was not unreasonable; his boldness justified itself. Yes, he was one of the men who succeed, and the life before him would be richer for all

the mistakes and miseries through which he had passed. Thirty, forty, fifty—why, twenty years hence he would be in the prime of manhood, with perhaps yet another twenty years of mental and bodily vigour. One of the men who succeed!

II

ON the morning after her journey down from London, Mrs. Warricombe awoke with the conviction that she had caught a cold. Her health was in general excellent, and she had no disposition to nurse imaginary ailments, but when some slight disorder broke the routine of her life she made the most of it, enjoying—much as children do—the importance with which for the time it invested her. At such seasons she was wont to regard herself with a mildly despondent compassion, to feel that her family and her friends held her of slight account; she spoke in a tone of conscious resignation, often with a forgiving smile. When the girls redoubled their attentions, and soothed her with gentle words, she would close her eyes and sigh, seeming to remind them that they would know her value when she was no more.

‘You are hoarse, mother,’ Sidwell said to her, when they met at breakfast.

'Am I, dear? You know I felt rather afraid of the journey. I hope I shan't be laid up.'

Sidwell advised her not to leave the house today. Having seen the invalid comfortably established in an upper room, she went into the city on business which could not be delayed. On her way occurred the meeting with Peak, but of this, on her return, she made no mention. Mother and daughter had luncheon upstairs, and Sidwell was full of affectionate solicitude.

'This afternoon you had better lie down for an hour or two,' she said.

'Do you think so? Just drop a line to father and warn him that we may be kept here for some time.'

'Shall I send for Dr. Endacott?'

'Just as you like, dear.'

But Mrs. Warricombe had eaten such an excellent lunch, that Sidwell could not feel uneasy.

'We'll see how you are this evening. At all events, it will be safer for you not to go downstairs. If you lie quiet for an hour or two, I can look for those pamphlets that father wants.'

'Just as you like, dear.'

By three o'clock the invalid was calmly slumbering. Having entered the bedroom on tiptoe and heard regular

breathing, Sidwell went down and for a few minutes lingered about the hall. A servant came to her for instructions on some domestic matter; when this was dismissed she mentioned that, if anyone called, she would be found in the library.

The pamphlets of which her father had spoken were soon discovered. She laid them aside, and seated herself by the fire, but without leaning back. At any sound within or outside the house she moved her head to listen. Her look was anxious, but the gleam of her eyes expressed pleasurable agitation.

At half-past three she went into the drawing-room, where all the furniture was draped, and the floor bare. Standing where she could look from a distance through one of the windows, at which the blind had been raised, she waited for a quarter of an hour. Then the chill atmosphere drove her back to the fireside. In the study, evidences of temporary desertion were less oppressive, but the windows looked only upon a sequestered part of the garden. Sidwell desired to watch the approach from the high-road, and in a few minutes she was again in the drawing-room. But scarcely had she closed the door behind her when a ringing of the visitors' bell sounded with unfamiliar distinctness. She started, hastened from

the room, fled into the library, and had time to seat herself before she heard the footsteps of a servant moving in answer to the summons.

The door opened, and Peak was announced.

Sidwell had never known what it was to be thus overcome with emotion. Shame at her inability to command the calm features with which she would naturally receive a caller flushed her cheeks and neck; she stepped forward with downcast eyes, and only in offering her hand could at length look at him who stood before her. She saw at once that Peak was unlike himself; he too had unusual warmth in his countenance, and his eyes seemed strangely large, luminous. On his forehead were drops of moisture.

This sight restored her self-control, or such measure of it as permitted her to speak in the conventional way.

'I am sorry that mother can't leave her room. She had a slight cold this morning, but I didn't think it would give her any trouble.'

Peak was delighted, and betrayed the feeling even whilst he constrained his face into a look of exaggerated anxiety.

'It won't be anything serious, I hope? The railway journey, I'm afraid.'

‘Yes, the journey. She has a slight hoarseness, but I think we shall prevent it from’——

Their eyes kept meeting, and with more steadfastness. They were conscious of mutual scrutiny, and, on both sides, of changes since they last met. When two people have devoted intense study to each other’s features, a three months’ absence not only revives the old impressions but subjects them to sudden modification which engrosses thought and feeling. Sidwell continued to utter commonplaces, simply as a means of disguising the thoughts that occupied her; she was saying to herself that Peak’s face had a purer outline than she had believed, and that his eyes had gained in expressiveness. In the same way Godwin said and replied he knew not what, just to give himself time to observe and enjoy the something new—the increased animation or subtler facial movements—which struck him as often as he looked at his companion. Each wondered what the other had been doing, whether the time had seemed long or short.

‘I hope you have kept well?’ Sidwell asked.

Godwin hastened to respond with civil inquiries.

‘I was very glad to hear from Mr. Warricombe a few days ago,’ he continued. Sidwell was not aware that her

father had written, but her pleased smile seemed to signify the contrary.

‘She looks younger,’ Peak said in his mind. ‘Perhaps that London dress and the new way of arranging her hair have something to do with it. But no, she looks younger in herself. She must have been enjoying the pleasures of town.’

‘You have been constantly occupied, no doubt,’ he added aloud, feeling at the same time that this was a clumsy expression of what he meant. Though he had unbuttoned his overcoat, and seated himself as easily as he could, the absurd tall hat which he held embarrassed him; to deposit it on the floor demanded an effort of which he was yet incapable.

‘I have seen many things and heard much talk,’ Sidwell was replying, in a gay tone. It irritated him; he would have preferred her to speak with more of the old pensiveness. Yet perhaps she was glad simply because she found herself again talking with him?

‘And you?’ she went on. ‘It has not been all work, I hope?’

‘Oh no! I have had many pleasant intervals.’

This was in imitation of her vivacity. He felt the

words and the manner to be ridiculous, but could not restrain himself. Every moment increased his uneasiness; the hat weighed in his hands like a lump of lead, and he was convinced that he had never looked so clownish. Did her smile signify criticism of his attitude?

With a decision which came he knew not how, he let his hat drop to the floor and pushed it aside. There, that was better; he felt less of a bumpkin.

Sidwell glanced at the glossy grotesque, but instantly averted her eyes, and asked rather more gravely:

‘Have you been in Exeter all the time?’

‘Yes.’

‘But you didn’t spend your Christmas alone, I hope?’

‘Oh, I had my books.’

Was there not a touch of natural pathos in this? He hoped so; then mocked at himself for calculating such effects.

‘I think you don’t care much for ordinary social pleasures, Mr. Peak?’

He smiled bitterly.

‘I have never known much of them,—and you remember that I look forward to a life in which they will have little part. Such a life,’ he continued, after a pause

'seems to you unendurably dull? I noticed that, when I spoke of it before.'

'You misunderstood me.' She said it so undecidedly that he gazed at her with puzzled look. Her eyes fell.

'But you like society?'

'If you use the word in its narrowest meaning,' she answered, 'then I not only dislike society, but despise it.'

She had raised her eyebrows, and was looking coldly at him. Did she mean to rebuke him for the tone he had adopted? Indeed, he seemed to himself presumptuous. But if they were still on terms such as these, was it not better to know it, even at the cost of humiliation? One moment he believed that he could read Sidwell's thoughts, and that they were wholly favourable to him; at another he felt absolutely ignorant of all that was passing in her, and disposed to interpret her face as that of a conventional woman who had never regarded him as on her own social plane. These uncertainties, these frequent reversions to a state of mind which at other times he seemed to have long outgrown, were a singular feature of his relations with Sidwell. Could such experiences consist with genuine love? Never had he felt more willing to answer the question with a negative. He felt that he was come

here to act a part, and that the end of the interview, be it what it might, would only affect him superficially.

‘No,’ he replied, with deliberation; ‘I never supposed that you had any interest in the most foolish class of wealthy people. I meant that you recognise your place in a certain social rank, and regard intercourse with your equals as an essential of happiness.’

‘If I understood why you ask’—— she began abruptly, but ceased as she met his glance. Again he thought she was asserting a distant dignity.

‘The question arose naturally out of a train of thought which always occupies me when I talk with you. I myself belong to no class whatever, and I can’t help wondering how—if the subject ever occurred to you—you would place me.’

He saw his way now, and, having said thus much, could talk on defiantly. This hour must decide his fortune with Sidwell, yet his tongue utterly refused any of the modes of speech which the situation would have suggested to an ordinary mind. He could not ‘make love.’ Instead of humility, he was prompted to display a rough arrogance; instead of tender phrases, he uttered what sounded like deliberate rudeness. His voice was less gently tuned than Sidwell had been wont to hear it.

It all meant that he despaired of wooing successfully, and more than half wished to force some word from Sidwell which would spare him the necessity of a plain avowal.

But before he had finished speaking, her face changed. A light of sudden understanding shone in her eyes; her lips softened to a smile of exquisite gentleness.

'The subject never *did* occur to me,' she answered. 'How should it? A friend is a friend.'

It was not strictly true, but in the strength of her emotion she could forget all that contradicted it.

'A friend—yes.'

Godwin began with the same note of bluntness. But of a sudden he felt the influence of Sidwell's smile. His voice sank into a murmur, his heart leapt, a thrill went through his veins.

'I wish to be something more than a friend.'

He felt that it was bald, inadequate. Yet the words had come of their own accord, on an impulse of unimpaired sincerity. Sidwell's head was bent.

'That is why I can't take simple things for granted,' he continued, his gaze fixed upon her. 'If I thought of nothing but friendship, it would seem rational enough that you should accept me for what I am—a man of education, talking your own language. Because I have

dared to hope something more, I suffer from the thought that I was not born into your world, and that you must be always remembering this difference.'

'Do you think me so far behind the age?' asked Sidwell, trying to laugh.

'Classes are getting mixed, confused. Yes, but we are so conscious of the process that we talk of class distinctions more than of anything else,—talk and think of them incessantly. You have never heard me make a profession of Radicalism; *I* am decidedly behind the age. Be what I may—and I have spiritual pride more than enough—the fact that I have relatives in the lower, even the lowest, social class must necessarily affect the whole course of my life. A certain kind of man declares himself proud of such an origin—and most often lies. Or one may be driven by it into rebellion against social privilege. To me, my origin is simply a grave misfortune, to be accepted and, if possible, overcome. Does that sound mean-spirited? I can't help it; I want you to know me.'

'I believe I know you very well,' Sidwell replied.

The consciousness that she was deceived checked the words which were rising to his lips. Again he saw himself in a pitiful light, and this self-contempt reflected upon Sidwell. He could not doubt that she was yielding

to him; her attitude and her voice declared it; but what was the value of love won by imposture? Why had she not intelligence enough to see through his hypocrisy, which at times was so thin a veil? How defective must her sympathy be!

‘Yet you have seen very little of me,’ he said, smiling.

There was a short silence; then he exclaimed in a voice of emotion:

‘How I wish we had known each other ever since that day when your brother brought me to your house near Kingsmill! If we had met and talked through all those years! But that was impossible for the very reason which makes me inarticulate now that I wish to say so much. When you first saw me I was a gawky schoolboy, learning to use my brains, and knowing already that life had nothing to offer me but a false position.. Whether I remained with my kith and kin, or turned my back upon them in the hope of finding my equals, I was condemned to a life of miserable incompleteness. I was born in exile. It took a long time before I had taught myself how to move and speak like one of the class to which I belonged by right of intellect. I was living alone in London, in mean lodging-houses. But the day came when I felt more confidence in myself. I had saved

money, and foresaw that in a year or two I should be able to carry out a plan, make one serious attempt to win a position among educated people.'

He stopped. Had he intended a full confession, it was thus he might have begun it. Sidwell was regarding him, but with a gentle look, utterly unsuspecting. She was unable to realise his character and his temptations.

'And have you not succeeded?' she asked, in a low voice.

'Have I? Let me put it to the test. I will set aside every thought of presumption; forget that I am a penniless student looking forward to a country curacy; and say what I wished to when we had our last conversation. Never mind how it sounds. I have dared to hope that some day I shall ask you to be my wife, and that you won't refuse.'

The word 'wife' reverberated on his ears. A whirl of emotion broke the defiant calm he had supported for the last few minutes. The silence seemed to be endless; when he looked at Sidwell, her head was bent, the eyes concealed by their drooping lids. Her expression was very grave.

'Such a piece of recklessness,' he said at length, 'deserves no answer.'

Sidwell raised her eyes and spoke gently, with voice a little shaken.

‘Why should you call it recklessness? I have never thought of the things that seem to trouble you so much. You were a friend of ours. Wasn’t that enough?’

It seemed to him an evasive reply. Doubtless it was much that she showed neither annoyance nor prudish reserve. He had won the right of addressing her on equal terms, but she was not inclined to anticipate that future day to which he pointed.

‘You have never thought of such things, because you have never thought of me as I of you. Every day of your absence in London has caused me torments which were due most often to the difference between your social position and mine. You have been among people of leisure and refinement and culture. Each evening you have talked with men whom it cost no effort to make themselves liked and respected. I think of that with bitterness.’

‘But why? I have made many acquaintances; have met very interesting people. I am glad of it; it enables me to understand you better than I could before.’

‘You are glad on that account?’

‘Yes; indeed I am.’

‘Dare I think you mean more than a civil phrase?’

‘I mean quite simply all that my words imply. I have thought of you, though certainly without bitterness. No one’s conversation in London interested me so much as yours.’

Soothed with an exquisite joy, Godwin felt his eyes moisten. For a moment he was reconciled to all the world, and forgot the hostilities of a lifetime.

‘And will it still be so, now, when you go back?’ he asked, in a soft tone.

‘I am sure it will.’

‘Then it will be strange if I ever feel bitterly again.’

Sidwell smiled.

‘You could have said nothing that could please me more. Why should your life be troubled by these dark moods?—I could understand it if you were still struggling with—with doubts, with all manner of uncertainties about your course’——

She hesitated, watching his face.

‘You think I have chosen well?’ said Godwin, meeting her look.

Sidwell's eyes were at once averted.

'I hope,' she said, 'we may talk of that again very soon. You have told me much of yourself, but I have said little or nothing of my own—difficulties. It won't be long before we come back from London, and then'——

Once more their eyes met steadily.

'You think,' Godwin asked, 'that I am right in aiming at a life of retirement?'

'It is one of my doubts. Your influence would be useful anywhere; but most useful, surely, among people of active mind.'

'Perhaps I shan't be able to choose. Remember that I am seeking for a livelihood as well as for a sphere of usefulness.'

His eyes fell as he spoke. Hitherto he had had no means of learning whether Sidwell would bring her husband a dowry substantial enough to be considered. Though he could not feel that she had betrothed herself to him, their talk was so nearly that of avowed lovers that perchance she would disclose whatever might help to put his mind at rest. The thought revived his painful self-consciousness; it was that of a schemer, yet would not the curse of poverty have suggested it to any man?

‘Perhaps you won’t be able to choose—at first,’ Sidwell assented, thereby seeming to answer his unspoken question. ‘But I am sure my father will use whatever influence he has.’

Had he been seated near enough, he would have been tempted to the boldness of taking her hand. What more encouragement did he await? But the distance between them was enough to check his embarrassed impulses. He could not even call her ‘Sidwell’; it would have been easier a few minutes ago, before she had begun to speak with such calm friendliness. Now, in spite of everything, he felt that to dare such a familiarity must needs call upon him the reproof of astonished eyes.

‘You return tomorrow?’ he asked, suddenly.

‘I think so. You have promised me to be cheerful until we are home again.’

‘A promise to be cheerful wouldn’t mean much. But it *does* mean much that I can think of what you have said to-day.’

Sidwell did not speak, and her silence seemed to compel him to rise. It was strange how remote he still felt from her pure, grave face, and the flowing outlines of her figure. Why could he not say to her,

'I love you; give me your hands; give me your lips'? Such words seemed impossible. Yet passion thrilled in him as he watched the grace of her movements, the light and shadow upon her features. She had risen and come a step or two forward.

'I think you look taller—in that dress.'

The words rather escaped him than were spoken. His need was to talk of common things, of trifles, that so he might come to feel humanly.

Sidwell smiled with unmistakable pleasure.

'Do I? Do you like the dress?'

'Yes. It becomes you.'

'Are you critical in such things?'

'Not with understanding. But I should like to see you every day in a new and beautiful dress.'

'Oh, I couldn't afford it!' was the laughing reply.

He offered his hand; the touch of her warm, soft fingers fired his blood.

'Sidwell!'

It was spoken at last, involuntarily, and he stood with his eyes on hers, her hand crushed in his.

'Some day!' she whispered.

If their lips met, the contact was so slight as to seem accidental; it was the mere timorous promise of a future

kiss. And both were glad of the something that had imposed restraint.

When Sidwell went up to her mother's sitting-room a servant had just brought tea.

'I hear that Mr. Peak has been,' said Mrs. Warricombe, who looked puffy and uncomfortable after her sleep. 'Emma was going to take tea to the study, but I thought it unnecessary. How could he know that we were here?'

'I met him this morning on my way into the town.'

'Surely it was rather inconsiderate of him to call.'

'He asked if he might.'

Mrs. Warricombe turned her head and examined Sidwell.

'Oh! And did he stay long?'

'Not very long,' replied Sidwell, who was in quiet good-humour.

'I think it would have been better if you had told him by the servant that I was not well enough to see callers. You didn't mention that he might be coming.'

Mrs. Warricombe's mind worked slowly at all times, and at present she was suffering from a cold.

‘Why didn’t you speak of it, Sidwell?’

‘Really—I forgot,’ replied the daughter, lightly.

‘And what had he to say?’

‘Nothing new, mother. Is your head better, dear?’

There was no answer. Mrs. Warricombe had conceived a vague suspicion which was so alarming that she would not press inquiries alluding to it. The encouragement given by her husband to Godwin Peak in the latter’s social progress had always annoyed her, though she could not frame solid objections. To be sure, to say of a man that he is about to be ordained meets every possible question that society can put; but Mrs. Warricombe’s uneasiness was in part due to personal dislike. Oftener than not, she still thought of Peak as he appeared some eleven years ago—an evident plebeian, without manners, without a redeeming grace. She knew the story of his relative who had opened a shop in Kingsmill; thinking of that now, she shuddered.

Sidwell began to talk of indifferent matters, and Peak was not again mentioned.

Her throat being still troublesome, Mrs. Warricombe retired very soon after dinner. About nine o’clock Sidwell went to the library, and sat down at her father’s writing-table, purposing a letter to Sylvia. She penned

a line or two, but soon lapsed into reverie, her head on her hands. Of a sudden the door was thrown open, and there stood Buckland, fresh from travel.

‘What has brought you?’ exclaimed his sister, starting up anxiously, for something in the young man’s look seemed ominous.

‘Oh, nothing to trouble about. I had to come down—on business. Mother gone to bed?’

Sidwell explained.

‘All right; doesn’t matter. I suppose I can sleep here? Let them get me a mouthful of something; cold meat, anything will do.’

His needs were quickly supplied, and before long he was smoking by the library fire.

‘I was writing to Sylvia,’ said his sister, glancing at her fragmentary letter.

‘Oh!’

‘You know she is at Salisbury?’

‘Salisbury? No, I didn’t.’

His carelessness proved to Sidwell that she was wrong in conjecturing that his journey had something to do with Miss Moorhouse. Buckland was in no mood for conversation; he smoked for a quarter of an hour whilst Sidwell resumed her writing.

'Of course you haven't seen Peak?' fell from him at length.

His sister looked at him before replying.

'Yes. He called this afternoon.'

'But who told him you were here?'

His brows were knitted, and he spoke very abruptly: Sidwell gave the same explanation as to her mother, and had further to reply that she alone received the caller.

'I see,' was Buckland's comment.

Its tone troubled Sidwell.

'Has your coming anything to do with Mr. Peak?'

'Yes, it has. I want to see him the first thing tomorrow.'

'Can you tell me what about?'

He searched her face, frowning.

'Not now. I'll tell you in the morning.'

Sidwell saw herself doomed to a night of suspense. She could not confess how nearly the mystery concerned her. Had Buckland made some discovery that irritated him against Peak? She knew he was disposed to catch at anything that seemed to tell against Godwin's claims to respectful treatment, and it surely must be a grave affair to hurry him on so long a journey. Though she could

imagine no ground of fear, the situation was seriously disturbing.

She tried to go on with her letter, but failed. As Buckland smoked in silence, she at length rose and said she would go upstairs.

‘All right! Shall see you at breakfast. Good-night!’

At nine next morning Mrs. Warricombe sent a message to Buckland that she wished to see him in her bedroom. He entered hurriedly.

‘Cold better, mother? I have only just time to drink a cup of coffee. I want to catch Peak before he can have left home.’

‘Mr. Peak? Why? I was going to speak about him.’

‘What were you going to say?’ Buckland asked, anxiously.

His mother began in a roundabout way which threatened long detention. In a minute or two Buckland had gathered enough to interrupt her with the direct inquiry:

‘You don’t mean that there’s anything between him and Sidwell?’

‘I do hope not; but I can’t imagine why she should—really, almost make a private appointment. I am very

uneasy, Buckland. I have hardly slept. Sidwell is rather—you know'——

'The deuce! I can't stop now. Wait an hour or two, and I shall have seen the fellow. You needn't alarm yourself. He will probably have disappeared in a few days.'

'What do you mean?' Mrs. Warricombe asked with nervous eagerness.

'I'll explain afterwards.'

He hurried away. Sidwell was at the breakfast-table. Her eyes seemed to declare that she had not slept well. With an insignificant word or two, the young man swallowed his cup of coffee, and had soon left the house.

III

THE wrath which illumined Buckland's countenance as he strode rapidly towards Longbrook Street was not unmingled with joy. In the deep pocket of his ulster lay something heavy which kept striking against his leg, and every such contact spurred him with a sense of satisfaction. All his suspicions were abundantly justified. Not only would his father and Sidwell be obliged to confess that his insight had been profounder than theirs, but he had the pleasure of standing justified before his own conscience. The philosophy by which he lived was strikingly illustrated and confirmed.

He sniffed the morning air, enjoyed the firmness of the frozen ground, on which his boots made a pleasant thud. To be sure, the interview before him would have its disagreeableness, but Buckland was not one of those over-civilised men who shrink from every scene of painful

explanation. The detection of a harmful lie was decidedly congenial to him—especially when he and his had been made its victims. He was now at liberty to indulge that antipathetic feeling towards Godwin Peak which sundry considerations had hitherto urged him to repress. Whatever might have passed between Peak and Sidwell, he could not doubt that his sister's peace was gravely endangered; the adventurer (with however much or little sincerity) had been making subtle love to her. Such a thought was intolerable. Buckland's class-pre-
✓judice asserted itself with brutal vigour now that it had moral indignation for an ally.

He had never been at Peak's lodgings, but the address was long since noted. Something of disdain came into his eyes as he approached the row of insignificant houses. Having pulled the bell, he stood at his full height, looking severely at the number painted on the door.

Mrs. Roots opened to him, and said that her lodger was at home. He gave his name, and after waiting for a moment was led to the upper floor. Godwin, who had breakfasted later than usual, still sat by the table. On Warricombe's entrance, he pushed back his chair and rose, but with deliberate movement, scarcely smiling. That Buckland made no offer of a friendly hand did not

surprise him. The name of his visitor had alarmed him with a sudden presentiment. Hardening his features, he stood in expectancy.

‘I want to have a talk with you,’ Buckland began.
‘You are at leisure, I hope?’

‘Pray sit down.’

Godwin pointed to a chair near the fire, but Warricombe, having thrown his hat on to a side table, seated himself by one of the windows. His motions proved that he found it difficult to support a semblance of courtesy.

‘I have come down from London on purpose to see you. Unless I am strangely misinformed you have been guilty of conduct which I shouldn’t like to call by its proper name.’

Remembering that he was in a little house, with thin partitions, he kept his voice low, but the effort this cost him was obvious. He looked straight at Peak, who did not return the gaze.

‘Indeed?’ said Godwin, coldly. ‘What is my crime?’

‘I am told that you have won the confidence of my relatives by what looks like a scheme of gross dishonesty.’

‘Indeed? Who has told you so?’

‘No one in so many words. But I happened to come across certain acquaintances of yours in London—people who know you very well indeed; and I find that they regard your position here as altogether incredible. You will remember I had much the same feeling myself. In support of their view it was mentioned to me that you had published an article in *The Critical*—the date less than a year ago, observe. The article was anonymous, but I remember it very well. I have re-read it, and I want you to tell me how the views it expresses can be reconciled with those you have maintained in conversation with my father.’

He drew from his pocket the incriminating periodical, turned it back at the article headed ‘The New Sophistry,’ and held it out for inspection.

‘Perhaps you would like to refresh your memory.’

‘Needless, thank you,’ returned Godwin, with a smile—in which the vanity of an author had its part.

Had Marcella betrayed him? He had supposed she knew nothing of this article, but Earwaker had perhaps spoken of it to Moxey before receiving the injunction of secrecy. On the other hand, it might be Earwaker himself from whom Warricombe had derived his information. Not impossible for the men to meet, and Earwaker’s

indignation might have led him to disregard a friend's confidence.

The details mattered little. He was face to face with the most serious danger that could befall him, and already he had strung himself to encounter it. Yet even in the same moment he asked, 'Is it worth while?'

'Did you write this?' Buckland inquired.

'Yes, I wrote it.'

'Then I wait for your explanation.'

'You mustn't expect me to enter upon an elaborate defence,' Godwin replied, taking his pipe from the mantelpiece and beginning to fill it. 'A man charged with rascality can hardly help getting excited—and that excitement, to one in your mood, seems evidence against him: Please to bear in mind that I have never declared myself an orthodox theologian. Mr. Warricombe is well acquainted with my views; to you I have never explained them.'

'You mean to say that my father knew of this article?'

'No. I have not spoken of it.'

'And why not?'

'Because, for one thing, I shouldn't write in that way now; and, for another, the essay seems to imply more than I meant when I did write it.'

“Seems to imply”——? I understand. You wish to represent that this attack on M’Naughten involves no attack on Christianity?’

‘Not on Christianity as I understand it.’

Buckland’s face expressed profound disgust, but he controlled his speech.

‘Well, I foresaw this. You attacked a new sophistry, but there is a newer sophistry still, and uncommonly difficult it is to deal with. Mr. Peak, I have a plain word to say to you. More than a year ago you asked me for my goodwill, to aid you in getting a social position. Say what you like, I see now that you dealt with me dishonestly. I can no longer be your friend in any sense, and I shall do my best to have you excluded from my parents’ house. My father will re-read this essay—I have marked the significant passages throughout—and will form his own judgment; I know what it will be.’

‘You are within your rights.’

‘Undoubtedly,’ replied Buckland, with polished insolence, as he rose from his seat. ‘I can’t forbid you to go to the house again, but—I hope we mayn’t meet there. It would be very unpleasant.’

Godwin was still pressing down the tobacco in the bowl of his pipe. He smiled, and glanced about the room.

Did Warricombe know how far things had gone between him and Sidwell? Whether or no, it was certain now that Sidwell would be informed of this disastrous piece of authorship—and the result?

What did it matter? There is no struggling against destiny. If he and Sidwell were ever fated to come together, why, these difficulties would all be surmounted. If, as seemed more than likely, he was again to be foiled on the point of success—he could bear it, perhaps even enjoy the comedy.

‘There is no possibility of arguing against determined anger,’ he said, quietly. ‘I am not all inclined to plead for justice; one only does that with a friend who desires to be just. My opinions are utterly distasteful to you, and personal motives have made you regard me as—a scoundrel to be got rid of. Well, there’s an end of it. I don’t see what is to be gained by further talk.’

This was a dismissal. Godwin felt the necessity of asserting himself thus far.

‘One question,’ said Warricombe, as he put the periodical back into his pocket. ‘What do you mean by my “personal motives”?’

Their eyes met for an instant.

‘I mean the motives which you have spoken of.’

It was Buckland's hope that Peak might reveal his relations with Sidwell, but he shrank from seeming to know anything of the matter. Clearly, no light was to be had from this source.

'I am afraid,' he said, moving to the door, 'that you will find my motives shared by all the people whose acquaintance you have made in Exeter.'

And without further leave-taking he departed.

There was a doubt in his mind. Peak's coolness might be the audacity of rascaldom; he preferred to understand it so; but it *might* have nothing to do with baseness.

'Confound it!' he muttered to himself, irritably. 'In our times life is so deucedly complicated. It used to be the easiest thing to convict a man of religious hypocrisy; nowadays, one has to bear in mind such a multiplicity of fine considerations. There's that fellow Bruno Chilvers: mightn't any one who had personal reasons treat him precisely as I have treated Peak? Both of them *may* be honest. Yet in Peak's case all appearances are against him—just because he is of low birth, has no means, and wants desperately to get into society. The fellow is a scoundrel; I am convinced of it. Yet his designs may be innocent. How, then, a scoundrel?—

‘Poor devil! Has he really fallen in love with Sidwell?’——

‘Humbug! He wants position, and the comfort it brings. And if he hadn’t acted like a blackguard—if he had come among us telling the truth—who knows? Sidwell wouldn’t then have thought of him, but for my own part I would willingly have given him a hand. There are plenty of girls who have learned to think for themselves.’

This was an unhappy line of reflection. It led to Sylvia Moorhouse—and to grinding of the teeth. By the time he reached the house, Buckland was again in remorseless mood.

He would have it out with Sidwell. The desire of proving to her that he had been right from the first overrode all thought of the pain he might inflict.

She was in the library. At breakfast he had noticed her heavy eyes, and that she made only a pretence of eating. She was now less unlike herself, but her position at the window showed that she had been waiting impatiently.

‘Isn’t mother coming down to-day?’ he asked.

‘Yes; after luncheon she will go out for an hour, if it keeps fine.’

‘And tomorrow you return?’

‘If mother feels able to travel.’

He had *The Critical* in his hand, and stood rustling the pages with his fingers.

‘I have been to see Peak.’

‘Have you?’

She moved a few steps and seated herself sideways on a small chair.

‘My business with him was confoundedly unpleasant. I’m glad it’s over. I wish I had known what I now do half a year ago.’

‘Let me hear what it is.’

‘You remember that I told you to be on your guard against Peak?’

Sidwell smiled faintly, and glanced at him, but made no answer.

‘I knew he wasn’t to be trusted,’ pursued her brother, with gloomy satisfaction. ‘And I had far better means of judging than father or you; but, of course, my suspicions were ungenerous and cynical.’

‘Will you come to the point?’ said Sidwell, in an irritated tone.

‘I think you read this article in *The Critical*?’ He approached and showed it to her. ‘We spoke of it once, *à propos* of M’Naughten’s book.’

She raised her eyes, and met his with a look of concern she could not disguise.

‘What of that?’

‘Peak is the author of it. It seems to have been written just about the time when I met him and brought him here as a visitor, and it was published after he had begun to edify you with his zeal for Christianity.’

She held out her hand.

‘You remember the tone of the thing?’ Buckland added. ‘I’ll leave it with you; but just glance at one or two of the passages I have marked. The Anglicanism of their writer is decidedly “broad,” it seems to me.’

He moved apart and watched his sister as she bent over the pages. There was silence for five minutes. Seeing that Sidwell had ceased to read, he ejaculated, ‘Well?’

‘Has Mr. Peak admitted the authorship?’ she asked, slowly and distinctly.

‘Yes, and with a cool impudence I hardly expected.’

‘Do you mean that he has made no attempt to justify himself?’

‘None worth listening to. Practically, he refused an explanation.’

Sidwell rested her forehead lightly upon the tips of

her fingers; the periodical slipped from her lap and lay open on the floor.

‘How did you find this out?’

‘In the simplest way. Knowing perfectly well that I had only to get familiar with some of his old friends to obtain proof that he was an impostor, I followed up my acquaintance with Miss Moxey—got hold of her brother—called upon them. Whilst I was there, a man named Malkin came in, and somehow or other he began talking of Peak. I learned at once precisely what I expected, that Peak was known to all these people as a violent anti-Christian. Malkin refused to believe the story of his going in for the Church—it sounded to him a mere joke. Then came out the fact that he had written this article. They all knew about it.’

He saw a flush of shame upon Sidwell’s half-hidden face. It gratified him. He was resolved to let her taste all the bitterness of her folly.

‘It seems pretty clear that the Moxeys—at all events Miss Moxey—knew the rascally part he was playing. Whether they wished to unmask him, or not, I can’t say. Perhaps not. Yet I caught an odd look on Miss Moxey’s face when that man Malkin began to talk of Peak’s characteristics and achievements. It came out,

by-the-bye, that he had given all his acquaintances the slip; they had completely lost sight of him—I suppose until Miss Moxey met him by chance at Budleigh Salterton. There's some mystery still. She evidently kept Peak's secret from the Moorhouses and the Walworths. A nice business, altogether!'

Again there was a long silence. Then Sidwell raised her face and said, abruptly:

'You may be quite mistaken.'

'How?'

'You went to Mr. Peak in a spirit of enmity and anger. It is not likely he would explain himself. You may have quite misunderstood what he said.'

'Ridiculous! You mean that he was perhaps "converted" after writing this article?—Then why did he allow it to be published?'

'He did not sign it. He may have been unable to withdraw it from the editor's hands.'

'Bosh! He didn't sign it, because the idea of this Exeter campaign came between the reception and the appearance of his paper. In the ordinary course of things, he would have been only too glad to see his name in *The Critical*. The scoundrelly project was conceived perhaps the very day that I brought him

here—perhaps in that moment—at lunch, do you remember?—when he began to talk of the sermon at the Cathedral?’

‘Why did he go to the Cathedral and hear that sermon?’

‘To amuse a Sunday morning, I suppose.’

‘That is not very likely in a man who hates and ridicules religion.’

‘It is decidedly more probable than the idea of his conversion.’

Sidwell fell back again into her brooding attitude.

‘The reason of your mistake in judging him,’ resumed Buckland, with emphasis, ‘is that you have undervalued his intellect. I told you long ago that a man of Peak’s calibre could not possibly be a supporter of dogmas and churches. No amount of plausible evidence would have made me believe in his sincerity. Let me beg you to appreciate the simple fact, that *no* young man of brains and education is nowadays an honest defender of mediæval Christianity—the Christianity of your churches. Such fellows may transact with their conscience, and make a more or less decent business of the clerical career; or, in rare cases, they may believe that society is served by the maintenance of a national faith, and accordingly preach with all manner of mental re-

serves and symbolical interpretations. These are in reality politicians, not priests. But Peak belongs to neither class. He is an acute cynic, bent on making the best of this world, since he believes in no other. How he must have chuckled after every visit to this house! He despises you, one and all. Believe me, he regards you with profound contempt.'

Buckland's obtuseness on the imaginative side spared him the understanding of his sister's state of mind. Though in theory he recognised that women were little amenable to reasoning, he took it for granted that a clear demonstration of Peak's duplicity must at once banish all thought of him from Sidwell's mind. Therefore he was unsparing in his assaults upon her delusion. It surprised him when at length Sidwell looked up with flashing, tear-dewed eyes and addressed him indignantly:

'In all this there is not one word of truth! You know that in representing the clergy as a body of ignorant and shallow men you speak out of prejudice. If you believed what you say, you would be yourself both ignorant and shallow. I can't trust your judgment of anyone whatever.'

She paused, but in a moment added the remark which

would have come first had she spoken in the order of her thoughts.

‘It is because the spirit of contempt is so familiar to you that you are so ready to perceive it in others. I consider that habit of mind worse than hypocrisy—yes, worse, far worse!’

Buckland was sorry for the pain he had given. The retort did not affect him, but he hung his head and looked uncomfortable. His next speech was in a milder strain :

‘I feel it a duty, Sidwell, to represent this man to you in what I verily believe to be the true light. To be despised by one who is immeasurably contemptible surely can’t distress you. If a butler gets into your house by means of a forged character, and then lays his plans for a great burglary, no doubt he scorns you for being so easily taken in,—and that is an exact parallel to Peak’s proceedings. He has somehow got the exterior of a gentleman; you could not believe that one who behaved so agreeably and talked so well was concealing an essentially base nature. But I must remind you that Peak belongs by origin to the lower classes, which is as much as to say that he lacks the sense of honour generally inherited by men of our world.

A powerful intellect by no means implies a corresponding development of the moral sense.'

Sidwell could not close her ears against the argument. But her features were still set in an expression of resentment, and she kept silence lest her voice should sound tearful.

'And don't be tempted by personal feeling,' pursued her brother, 'to make light of hypocrisy—especially this kind. The man who can act such a part as Peak's has been for the last twelve months must be capable of any depravity. It is difficult for you to estimate his baseness, because you are only half convinced that any one can really be an enemy of religious faith. You suspect a lurking belief even in the minds of avowed atheists. But take the assurance from me that a man like Peak (and I am at one with him in this matter) regards with absolute repugnance every form of supernaturalism. For him to affect belief in *your* religion, is a crime against conscience. Peak has committed this crime with a mercenary motive,—what viler charge could be brought against him?'

Without looking at him, his sister replied:

'Whether he is guilty or not, I can't yet determine. But the motive of his life here was not mercenary.'

‘Then how would you describe it?’ Buckland asked, in astonishment.

‘I only know that it can’t be called mercenary.’

‘Then the distinction you draw must be a very fine one.—He has abandoned the employment by which he lived, and by his own admission he looks to the Church for means of support. It was necessary for him to make interest with people of social position; the closer his relations with them the better. From month to month he has worked skilfully to establish his footing in this house, and among your friends. What do you call this?’

She had no verbal answer to make, but her look declared that she held to another interpretation.

‘Well,’ Buckland added, impatiently, ‘we will hear father’s opinion. He, remember, has been deceived in a very gross and cruel way. Possibly he may help you to see the thing in all its hatefulness.’

Sidwell turned to him.

‘You go to London this afternoon?’

‘In an hour or two,’ he replied, consulting his watch.

‘Is it any use my asking you to keep silence about everything until I am back in town?’

Buckland frowned and hesitated.

‘To mother as well as father, you mean?’

‘Yes. Will you do me this kindness?’

‘Answer me a question, Sidwell. Have you any thought of seeing Peak?’

‘I can’t say,’ she replied, in agitation. ‘I must leave myself free. I have a right to use my own judgment.’

‘Don’t see him! I beg you not to see him!’

He was so earnest that Sidwell suspected some other reason in his request than regard for her dignity.

‘I must leave myself free,’ she repeated, with shaking voice. ‘In any case I shall be back in London tomorrow evening—that is, if—but I am sure mother will wish to go. Grant me this one kindness; say nothing here or there till I am back and have seen you again.’

He turned a deaf ear, for the persistency with which she resisted proof of Peak’s dishonour had begun to alarm him. Who could say what miserable folly she might commit in the next four-and-twenty hours? The unavoidable necessity of his own return exasperated him; he wished to see her safe back in London, and under her father’s care.

‘No,’ he exclaimed, with a gesture of determination

'I can't keep such a thing as this secret for another hour. Mother must know at once—especially as you mean to invite that fellow into the house again.—I have half a mind to telegraph to Godolphin that I can't possibly be with him to-night.'

Sidwell regarded him and spoke with forced composure.

'Do as seems right to you, Buckland. But don't think that by remaining here you would prevent me from seeing Mr. Peak, if I wish to do so. That is treating me too much like a child. You have done your part—doubtless your duty; now I must reflect and judge for myself. Neither you nor anyone else has authority over me in such circumstances.'

'Very well. I have no authority, as you say, but common sense bids me let mother know how the case stands.'

And angrily he left the room.

The Critical still lay where it had fallen. When Sidwell had stood a while in confused thought, her eye turned to it, and she went hurriedly to take it up. Yes, that was the first thing to be done, to read those pages with close care. For this she must have privacy. She ran up-stairs and shut herself in her bedroom.

But did not at once begin to read. It concerned her deeply to know whether Peak had so expressed himself in this paper, that no room was left for doubt as to his convictions; but another question pressed upon her with even more urgency—could it be true that he did not love her? If Buckland were wholly right, then it mattered little in what degree she had been misled by intellectual hypocrisy.

It was impossible to believe that Peak had made love to her in cold blood, with none but sordid impulses. The thought was so humiliating that her mind resolutely rejected it; and she had no difficulty in recalling numberless minutiae of behaviour—nuances of look and tone such as abide in a woman's memory—any one of which would have sufficed to persuade her that he felt genuine emotion. How had it come to pass that a feeling of friendly interest, which did not for a moment threaten her peace, changed all at once to an agitation only the more persistent the more she tried to subdue it,—how, if it were not that her heart responded to a passionate appeal, effectual as only the sincerest love can prove? Prior to that long talk with Godwin, on the eve of her departure for London, she had not imagined that he loved her; when they said

good-bye to each other, she knew by her own sensations all that the parting meant to him. She felt glad, instead of sorry, that they were not to meet again for several months; for she wished to think of him calmly and prudently, now that he presented himself to her imagination in so new an aspect. The hand-clasp was a mutual assurance of fidelity.

‘I should never have loved him, if he had not first loved me. Of that I am as firmly convinced as of my own existence. It is not in my nature to dream romances. I never did so even as a young girl, and at this age I am not likely to fall into a foolish self-deception. I had often thought about him. He seemed to me a man of higher and more complex type than those with whom I was familiar; but most surely I never attributed to him even a corresponding interest in me. I am neither vain, nor very anxious to please; I never suffered because men did not woo me; I have only moderate good looks, and certainly no uncommon mental endowments.—If he had been attracted by Sylvia, I should have thought it natural; and I more than once suspected that Sylvia was disposed to like him. It seemed strange at first that his choice should have fallen upon me; yet when I was far away from

him, and longed so to sit once more by him and hear him talk, I understood that it might be in my power to afford him the companionship he needed.—Mercenary? If I had been merely a governess in the house, he would have loved me just the same!’

Only by a painful effort could she remind herself that the ideal which had grown so slowly was now defaced. He loved her, but it was not the love of an honest man. After all, she had no need to peruse this writing of his; she remembered so well how it had impressed her when she read it on its first appearance, how her father had spoken of it. Buckland’s manifold evidence was irresistible. Why should Peak have concealed his authorship? Why had he disappeared from among the people who thoroughly knew him?

She had loved a dream. What a task would it be to distinguish between those parts of Peak’s conversation which represented his real thoughts, and those which were mockery of his listeners! The plan of a retired life which he had sketched to her—was it all falsehood? Impossible, for his love was inextricably blended with the details. Did he imagine that the secret of his unbelief could be preserved for a lifetime, and that it would have no effect whatever upon his happiness as a

man? This seemed a likely reading of the problem. But what a multitude of moral and intellectual obscurities remained! The character which had seemed to her nobly simple was become a dark and dread enigma.

She knew so little of his life. If only it could all be laid bare to her, the secret of his position would be revealed. Buckland's violence altogether missed its mark; the dishonour of such a man as Godwin Peak was due to no gross incentive.

It was probable that, in talk with her father, he had been guilty of more deliberate misrepresentation than had marked his intercourse with the rest of the family. Her father, she felt sure, had come to regard him as a valuable source of argument in the battle against materialism. Doubtless the German book, which Peak was translating, bore upon that debate, and consequently was used as an aid to dissimulation. Thinking of this, she all but shared her brother's vehement feeling. It pained her to the inmost heart that her father's generous and candid nature should thus have been played upon. The deceit, as it concerned herself alone, she could forgive; at least she could suspend judgment until the accused had offered his defence—feeling that the psychology of the case must

till then be beyond her powers of analysis. But the wrong done to her father revolted her.

A tap at the door caused her to rise, trembling. She remembered that by this time her mother must be aware of the extraordinary disclosure, and that a new scene of wretched agitation had to be gone through.

‘Sidwell!’

It was Mrs. Warricombe’s voice, and the door opened.

‘Sidwell!—What *does* all this mean? I don’t understand half that Buckland has been telling me.’

The speaker’s face was mottled, and she stood panting, a hand pressed against her side.

‘How very, very imprudent we have been! How wrong of father not to have made inquiries! To think that such a man should have sat at our table!’

‘Sit down, mother; don’t be so distressed,’ said Sidwell, calmly. ‘It will all very soon be settled.’

‘Of course not a word must be said to anyone. How very fortunate that we shall be in London till the summer! Of course he must leave Exeter.’

‘I have no doubt he will. Let us talk as little of it as possible, mother. We shall go back to-morrow’——

‘This afternoon! We will go back with Buckland.

That is decided. I couldn't sleep here another night.'

'We must remain till tomorrow,' Sidwell replied, with quiet determination.

'Why? What reason can there be?'

Mrs. Warricombe's voice was suspended by a horrible surmise.

'Of course we shall go to-day, Sidwell,' she continued, in nervous haste. 'To think of that man having the impudence to call and sit talking with you! If I could have dreamt'——

'Mother,' said Sidwell, gravely, 'I am obliged to see Mr. Peak, either this evening or tomorrow morning.'

'To—to see him——? Sidwell! What can you mean?'

'I have a reason for wishing to hear from his own lips the whole truth.'

'But we *know* the whole truth!—What can you be thinking of, dear? Who is this Mr. Peak that you should ask him to come and see you, under *any* circumstances?'

It would never have occurred to Sidwell to debate with her mother on subtle questions of character and motive, but the agitation of her nerves made it difficult for her to

keep silence under these vapid outcries. She desired to be alone; commonplace discussion of the misery that had come upon her was impossible. A little more strain, and she would be on the point of tears, a weakness she was resolute to avoid.

‘Let me think quietly for an hour or two,’ she said, moving away. ‘It’s quite certain that I must stay here till tomorrow. When Buckland has gone, we can talk again.’

‘But, Sidwell’——

‘If you insist, I must leave the house, and find a refuge somewhere else.’

Mrs. Warricombe tossed her head.

‘Oh, if I am not permitted to speak to you! I only hope you won’t have occasion to remember my warning! Such extraordinary behaviour was surely never known! I should have thought’——

Sidwell was by this time out of the room. Safe in privacy she sat down as if to pen a letter. From an hour’s agitated thought, the following lines resulted:

‘My brother has told me of a conversation he held with you this morning. He says you admit the authorship of an article which seems quite inconsistent with what you have professed in our talks. How am I to understand

this contradiction? I beg that you will write to me at once. I shall anxiously await your reply.'

This, with her signature, was all. Having enclosed the note in an envelope, she left it on her table and went down to the library, where Buckland was sitting alone in gloomy reverie. Mrs. Warricombe had told him of Sidwell's incredible purpose. Recognising his sister's independence, and feeling sure that if she saw Peak it could only be to take final leave of him, he had decided to say no more. To London he must perforce return this afternoon, but he had done his duty satisfactorily, and just in time. It was plain that things had gone far between Peak and Sidwell; the latter's behaviour avowed it. But danger there could be none, with 'The New Sophistry' staring her in the eyes. Let her see the fellow, by all means. His evasions and hair-splittings would complete her deliverance.

'There's a train at 1.53,' Buckland remarked, rising, 'and I shall catch it if I start now. I can't stay for the discomfort of luncheon. You remain here till tomorrow, I understand?'

'Yes.'

'It's a pity you are angry with me. It seems to me I have done you a kindness.'

‘I am not angry with you, Buckland,’ she replied, gently. ‘You have done what you were plainly obliged to do.’

‘That’s a sensible way of putting it. Let us say good-bye with friendliness then.’

Sidwell gave her hand, and tried to smile. With a look of pained affection, Buckland went silently away.

Shortly after, Sidwell fetched her note from upstairs, and gave it to the housekeeper to be delivered by hand as soon as possible. Mrs. Warricombe remained invisible, and Sidwell went back to the library, where she sat with *The Critical* open before her at Godwin’s essay.

Hours went by; she still waited for an answer from Longbrook Street.

At six o’clock she went upstairs and spoke to her mother.

‘Shall you come down to dinner?’

‘No, Sidwell,’ was the cold reply. ‘Be so good as to excuse me.’

Towards eight, a letter was brought to her; it could only be from Godwin Peak. With eyes which endeavoured to take in all at once, and therefore could at first distinguish nothing, she scanned what seemed to be hurriedly written lines.

'I have tried to answer you in a long letter, but after all I can't send it. I fear you wouldn't understand. Better to repeat simply that I wrote the article you speak of. I should have told you about it some day, but now my intentions and hopes matter nothing. Whatever I said now would seem dishonest pleading. Good-bye.'

She read this so many times that at length she had but to close her eyes to see every word clearly traced on the darkness. The meanings she extracted from each sentence were scarcely less numerous than her perusals. In spite of reason, this enigmatic answer brought her some solace. He *could* defend himself; that was the assurance she had longed for. Impossible (she again and again declared to herself with emphasis) for their intimacy to be resumed. But in secret she could hold him, if not innocent, at all events not base. She had not bestowed her love upon a mere impostor.

But now a mournful, regretful passion began to weigh upon her heart. She shed tears, and presently stole away to her room for a night of sorrow.

What must be her practical course? If she went back to London without addressing another word to him, he must understand her silence as a final farewell. In that

case his departure from Exeter would, no doubt, speedily follow, and there was little likelihood that she would ever again see him. Were Godwin a vulgar schemer, he would not so readily relinquish the advantage he had gained; he would calculate upon the weakness of a loving woman, and make at least one effort to redeem his position. As it was, she could neither hope nor fear that he would try to see her again. Yet she wished to see him, desired it ardently.

And yet—for each impulse of ardour was followed by a cold fit of reasoning—might not his abandonment of the position bear a meaning such as Buckland would of course attribute to it? If he were hopeless of the goodwill of her parents, what profit would it be to him to retain her love? She was no heiress; supposing him actuated by base motive, her value in his eyes came merely of his regarding her as a means to an end.

But this was to reopen the question of whether or not he truly loved her. No; he was forsaking her because he thought it impossible for her to pardon the deceit he had undeniably practised—with whatever palliating circumstances. He was overcome with shame. He imagined her indignant, scornful.

Why had she written such a short, cold note, the very

thing to produce in his mind a conviction of her resentment?

Hereupon came another paroxysm of tearful misery. It was intensified by a thought she had half consciously been repressing ever since the conversation with her brother. Was it true that Miss Moxey had had it in her power to strip Godwin of a disguise? What, then, were the relations existing between him and that strangely impressive woman? How long had they known each other? It was now all but certain that a strong intellectual sympathy united their minds—and perhaps there had been something more.

She turned her face upon the pillow and moaned.

IV

AND from the Moxeys Buckland had derived his information. What was it he said—something about ‘an odd look’ on Miss Moxey’s face when that friend of theirs talked of Peak? Might not such a look signify a conflict between the temptation to injure and the desire to screen?

Sidwell constructed a complete romance. Ignorance of the past of both persons concerned allowed her imagination free play. There was no limit to the possibilities of self-torment.

The desire to see Godwin took such hold upon her, that she had already begun to think over the wording of another note to be sent to him the first thing in the morning. His reply had been insufficient: simple justice required that she should hear him in his own defence before parting with him for ever. If she kept silence, he

would always remember her with bitterness, and this would make her life-long sorrow harder to bear. Sidwell was one of those few women whose love, never demonstrative, never exigent, only declares itself in all its profound significance when it is called upon to pardon. What was likely to be the issue of a meeting with Godwin she could not foresee. It seemed all but impossible for their intercourse to continue, and their coming face to face might result in nothing but distress to both, better avoided; yet judgment yielded to emotion. Yesterday—only yesterday—she had yielded herself to the joy of loving, and before her consciousness had had time to make itself familiar with its new realm, before her eyes had grown accustomed to the light suddenly shed about her, she was bidden to think of what had happened as only a dream. Her heart refused to make surrender of its hope. Though it could be held only by an encouragement of recognised illusion, she preferred to dream yet a little longer. Above all, she must taste the luxury of forgiving her lover, of making sure that her image would not dwell in his mind as that of a self-righteous woman who had turned coldly from his error, perhaps from his repentance.

A little after midnight, she rose from bed, slipped on

her dressing-gown, and sat down by the still burning lamp to write what her passion dictated :

‘ Why should you distrust my ability, or my willingness to understand you ? It would have been so much better if you had sent what you first wrote. These few lines do not even let me know whether you think yourself to blame. Why do you leave me to form a judgment of things as they appear on the surface ? If you *wish* to explain, if you sincerely feel that I am in danger of wronging you by misconstruction, come to me as soon as you have received this note. If you will not come, then at least write to me—the letter you at first thought of sending. This afternoon (Friday) I return to London, but you know my address there. Don’t think because I wrote so briefly that I have judged you. S. W.’

To have committed this to paper was a relief. In the morning she would read it over and consider again whether she wished to send it.

On the table lay *The Critical*. She opened it once more at the page that concerned her, and glanced over the first few lines. Then, having put the lamp nearer to the bed, she again lay down, not to sleep but to read.

This essay was not so repugnant to her mind or her feelings as when she first became acquainted with it. Its bitterness no longer seemed to be directed against herself. There was much in it with which she could have agreed at any time during the last six months, and many strokes of satire, which till the other day would have offended her, she now felt to be legitimate. As she read on, a kind of anger such as she had never experienced trembled along her nerves. Was it not flagrantly true that English society at large made profession of a faith which in no sense whatever it could be said sincerely to hold? Was there not every reason to believe that thousands of people keep up an ignoble formalism, because they feared the social results of declaring their severance from the religion of the churches? This was a monstrous evil; she had never till this moment understood the scope of its baneful effects. But for the prevalence of such a spirit of hypocrisy, Godwin Peak would never have sinned against his honour. Why was it not declared in trumpet-tones of authority, from end to end of the Christian world, that Christianity, as it has been understood through the ages, can no longer be accepted? For that was the truth, the truth, the *truth!*

She lay back, quivering as if with terror. For an instant her soul had been filled with hatred of the religion for which she could once have died. It had stood before her as a power of darkness and ignorance, to be assailed, crushed, driven from the memory of man.

Last night she had hardly slept, and now, though her body was numb with weariness, her mind kept up a feverish activity. She was bent on excusing Godwin, and the only way in which she could do so was by arraigning the world for its huge dishonesty. In a condition between slumber and waking, she seemed to plead for him before a circle of Pharisaic accusers. Streams of silent eloquence rushed through her brain, and the spirit which prompted her was closely akin to that of 'The New Sophistry.' Now and then, for a few seconds, she was smitten with a consciousness of extraordinary change in her habits of thought. She looked about her with wide, fearful eyes, and endeavoured to see things in the familiar aspect. As if with physical constraint her angry imagination again overcame her, until at length from the penumbra of sleep she passed into its profoundest gloom.

To wake when dawn was pale at the window. A

choking odour reminded her that she had not extinguished the lamp, which must have gone out for lack of oil. She opened the window, took a draught of water, and addressed herself to sleep again. But in recollecting what the new day meant for her, she had spoilt the chances of longer rest. Her head ached; all worldly thoughts were repulsive, yet she could not dismiss them. She tried to repeat the prayers she had known since childhood, but they were meaningless, and a sense of shame attached to their utterance.

When the first gleam of sun told her that it was past eight o'clock, she made an effort and rose.

At breakfast Mrs. Warricombe talked of the departure for London. She mentioned an early train; by getting ready as soon as the meal was over, they could easily reach the station in time. Sidwell made no direct reply and seemed to assent; but when they rose from the table, she said, nervously:

'I couldn't speak before the servants. I wish to stay here till the afternoon.'

'Why, Sidwell?'

'I have asked Mr. Peak to come and see me this morning.'

Her mother knew that expostulation was useless, but

could not refrain from a long harangue made up of warning and reproof.

‘You have very little consideration for me,’ was her final remark. ‘Now we shan’t get home till after dark, and of course my throat will be bad again.’

Glad of the anti-climax, Sidwell replied that the day was much warmer, and that with care no harm need come of the journey.

‘It’s easy to say that, Sidwell. I never knew you to behave so selfishly, never!’

‘Don’t be angry with me, mother. You don’t know how grieved I am to distress you so. I can’t help it, dear; indeed, I can’t. Won’t you sacrifice a few hours to put my mind at rest?’

Mrs. Warricombe once more gave expression to her outraged feelings. Sidwell could only listen silently with bent head.

.
If Godwin were coming at all, he would be here by eleven o’clock. Sidwell had learnt that her letter was put into his hands. She asked him to come at once, and nothing but a resolve not to meet her could delay him more than an hour or two.

At half-past ten the bell sounded. She was sitting in

the library with her back turned to the door. When a voice announced 'Mr. Peak,' she did not at once rise, and with a feeling akin to terror she heard the footstep slowly approaching. It stopped at some distance from her; then, overcoming a weakness which threatened to clog her as in a nightmare, she stood up and looked round.

Peak wore neither overcoat nor gloves, but otherwise was dressed in the usual way. As Sidwell fixed her eyes upon him, he threw his hat into a chair and came a step or two nearer. Whether he had passed the night in sleep or vigil could not be determined; but his look was one of shame, and he did not hold himself so upright as was his wont.

'Will you come and sit down?' said Sidwell, pointing to a chair not far from that on which one of her hands rested.

He moved forward, and was about to pass near her, when Sidwell involuntarily held her hand to him. He took it and gazed into her face with a melancholy smile.

'What does it mean?' she asked, in a low voice.

He relinquished her fingers, which he had scarcely pressed, and stood with his arms behind his back.

'Oh, it's all quite true,' was his reply, wearily spoken.

'What is true?'

'All that you have heard from your brother.'

'All?—But how can you know what he has said?'

They looked at each other. Peak's lips were set as if in resistance of emotion, and a frown wrinkled his brows. Sidwell's gaze was one of fear and appeal.

'He said, of course, that I had deceived you.'

'But in what?—Was there no truth in anything you said to me?'

'To you I have spoken far more truth than falsehood.'

A light shone in her eyes, and her lips quivered.

'Then,' she murmured, 'Buckland was not right in everything.'

'I understand. He wished you to believe that my love was as much a pretence as my religion?'

'He said that.'

'It was natural enough.—And you were disposed to believe it?'

'I thought it impossible. But I should have thought the same of the other things.'

Peak nodded, and moved away. Watching him, Sidwell

was beset with conflicting impulses. His assurance had allayed her worst misgiving, and she approved the self-restraint with which he bore himself, but at the same time she longed for a passionate declaration. As a reasoning woman, she did her utmost to remember that Peak was on his defence before her, and that nothing could pass between them but grave discussion of the motives which had impelled him to dishonourable behaviour. As a woman in love, she would fain have obscured the moral issue by indulgence of her heart's desire. She was glad that he held aloof, but if he had taken her in his arms, she would have forgotten everything in the moment's happiness.

'Let us sit down, and tell me—tell me all you can.'

He delayed a moment, then seated himself opposite to her. She saw now that his movements were those of physical fatigue; and the full light from the window, enabling her to read his face more distinctly, revealed the impress of suffering. Instead of calling upon him to atone in such measure as was possible for the wrong he had done her, she felt ready to reproach herself for speaking coldly when his need of solace was so great.

‘What can I tell you,’ he said, ‘that you don’t know, or that you can’t conjecture?’

‘But you wrote that there was so much I could not be expected to understand. And I can’t, can’t understand you. It still seems impossible. Why did you hide the truth from me?’

‘Because if I had begun by telling it, I should never have won a kind look or a kind thought from you.’

Sidwell reflected.

‘But what did you care for me then—when it began?’

‘Not so much as I do now, but enough to overthrow all the results of my life up to that time. Before I met you in this house I had seen you twice, and had learned who you were. I was sitting in the Cathedral when you came there with your sister and Miss Moorhouse—do you remember? I heard Fanny call you by your name, and that brought to my mind a young girl whom I had known in a slight way years before. And the next day I again saw you there, at the service; I waited about the entrance only to see you. I cared enough for you then to conceive a design which for a long time seemed too hateful really to be carried out, but—at last it was, you see.’

Sidwell breathed quickly. Nothing he could have urged for himself would have affected her more deeply than this. To date back and extend the period of his love for her was a flattery more subtle than Peak imagined.

‘Why didn’t you tell me that the day before yesterday?’ she asked, with tremulous bosom.

‘I had no wish to remind myself of baseness in the midst of a pure joy.’

She was silent, then exclaimed, in accents of pain :

‘Why should you have thought it necessary to be other than yourself? Couldn’t you see, at first meeting with us, that we were not bigoted people? Didn’t you know that Buckland had accustomed us to understand how common it is nowadays for people to throw off the old religion? Would father have looked coldly on you if he had known that you followed where so many good and thoughtful men were leading?’

He regarded her anxiously.

‘I had heard from Buckland that your father was strongly prejudiced; that you also were quite out of sympathy with the new thought.’

‘He exaggerated—even then.’

‘Exaggerated? But on what plea could I have come

to live in this neighbourhood? How could I have kept you in sight—tried to win your interest? I had no means, no position. The very thought of encouraging my love for you demanded some extraordinary step. What course was open to me?’

Sidwell let her head droop.

‘I don’t know. You might perhaps have discovered a way.’

‘But what was the use, when the mere fact of my heresy would have forbidden hope from the outset?’

‘Why should it have done so?’

‘Why? You know very well that you could never even have been friendly with the man who wrote that thing in the review.’

‘But here is the proof how much better it is to behave truthfully! In this last year I have changed so much that I find it difficult to understand the strength of my former prejudices. What is it to me now that you speak scornfully of attempts to reconcile things that can’t be reconciled? I understand the new thought, and how natural it is for you to accept it. If only I could have come to know you well, your opinions would not have stood between us.’

Peak made a slight gesture, and smiled incredulously.

‘You think so now.’

‘And I have such good reason for my thought,’ rejoined Sidwell, earnestly, ‘that when you said you loved me, my only regret in looking to the future was—that you had resolved to be a clergyman.’

He leaned back in the chair, and let a hand fall on his knee. The gesture seemed to signify a weary relinquishment of concern in what they were discussing.

‘How could I foresee that?’ he uttered, in a corresponding tone.

Sidwell was made uneasy by the course upon which she had entered. To what did her words tend? If only to a demonstration that fate had used him as the plaything of its irony—if, after all, she had nothing to say to him but ‘See how your own folly has ruined you,’ then she had better have kept silence. She not only appeared to be offering him encouragement, but was in truth doing so. She wished him to understand that his way of thinking was no obstacle to her love, and with that purpose she was even guilty of a slight misrepresentation. For it was only since the shock of this disaster that she had clearly recognised the

change in her own mind. True, the regret of which she spoke had for an instant visited her, but it represented a mundane solicitude rather than an intellectual scruple. It had occurred to her how much brighter would be their prospect if Peak were but an active man of the world, with a career before him distinctly suited to his powers.

His contention was undeniably just. The influence to which she had from the first submitted was the same that her father felt so strongly. Godwin interested her as a self-reliant champion of the old faiths, and his personal characteristics would never have awakened such sympathy in her but for that initial recommendation. Natural prejudice would have prevented her from perceiving the points of kindred between his temperament and her own. His low origin, the ridiculous stories connected with his youth—why had she, in spite of likelihood, been able to disregard these things? Only because of what she then deemed his spiritual value.

But for the dishonourable part he had played, this bond of love would never have been formed between them. The thought was a new apology for his transgression; she could not but defy her conscience, and

look indulgently on the evil which had borne such fruit.

Godwin had begun to speak again.

'This is quite in keeping with the tenor of my whole life. Whatever I undertake ends in frustration at a point where success seems to have just come within my reach. Great things and trifles—it's all the same. My course at College was broken off at the moment when I might have assured my future. Later, I made many an effort to succeed in literature, and when at length something of mine was printed in a leading review, I could not even sign it, and had no profit from the attention it excited. Now—well, you see. Laughable, isn't it?'

Sidwell scarcely withheld herself from bending forward and giving him her hand.

'What shall you do?' she asked.

'Oh, I am not afraid. I have still enough money left to support me until I can find some occupation of the old kind. Fortunately, I am not one of those men whose brains have no marketable value.'

'If you knew how it pains me to hear you!'

'If I didn't believe that, I couldn't speak to you like this. I never thought you would let me see you again,

and if you hadn't asked me to come, I could never have brought myself to face you. But it would have been a miserable thing to go off without even knowing what you thought of me.'

'Should you never have written to me?'

'I think not. You find it hard to imagine that I have any pride, no doubt; but it is there, explain it how one may.'

'It would have been wrong to leave me in such uncertainty.'

'Uncertainty?'

'About you—about your future.'

'Did you quite mean that? Hadn't your brother made you doubt whether I loved you at all?'

'Yes. But no, I didn't doubt. Indeed, indeed, I didn't doubt! But I felt such a need of hearing from your own lips that—— Oh, I can't explain myself!'

Godwin smiled sadly.

'I think I understand. But there was every reason for my believing that *your* love could not bear such a test. You must regard me as quite a different man—one utterly unknown to you.'

He had resolved to speak not a word that could sound like an appeal to her emotions. When he entered the

room he felt a sincere indifference as to what would result from the interview, for to his mind the story was ended, and he had only to retire with the dignity still possible to a dishonoured man. To touch the note of pathos would be unworthy; to exert what influence might be left to him, a wanton cruelty. But he had heard such unexpected things, that it was not easy for him to remember how complete had seemed the severance between him and Sidwell. The charm of her presence was reasserting itself, and when avowal of continued love appeared so unmistakably in her troubled countenance, her broken words, he could not control the answering fervour. He spoke in a changed voice, and allowed his eyes to dwell longingly upon hers.

‘I felt so at first,’ she answered. ‘And it would be wrong to pretend that I can still regard you as I did before.’

It cost her a great effort to add these words. When they were spoken, she was at once glad and fearful.

‘I am not so foolish, as to think it possible,’ said Peak, half turning away.

‘But that is no reason,’ she pursued, ‘why we should become strangers. You are still so young a man; life

must be so full of possibilities for you. This year has been wasted, but when you leave Exeter'——

An impatient movement of Godwin's checked her.

'You are going to encourage me to begin the struggle once more,' he said, bitterly. 'Where? How? It is so easy to talk of "possibilities."'

'You are not without friends—I mean friends whose sympathy is of real value to you.'

Saying this, she looked keenly at him.

'Friends,' he replied, 'who perhaps at this moment are laughing over my disgrace.'

'How do they know of—what has happened?'

'How did your brother get his information? I didn't care to ask him.—No, I don't even wish you to say anything about that.'

'But surely there is no reason for keeping it secret. Why may I not speak freely? Buckland told me that he had heard you spoken of at the house of people named Moxey.'

She endeavoured to understand the smile which rose to his lips.

'Now it is clear to me,' he said. 'Yes, I suppose that was inevitable, sooner or later.'

'You knew that he had become acquainted with the Moxeys?'

Her tone was more reserved than hitherto.

'Yes, I knew he had. He met Miss Moxey by chance at Budleigh Salterton, and I happened to be there—at the Moorhouses'—on the same day.'

Sidwell glanced at him inquiringly, and waited for something more.

'I saw Miss Moxey in private,' he added, speaking more quickly, 'and asked her to keep my secret. I ought to be ashamed to tell you this, but it is better you should know how far my humiliation has gone.'

He saw that she was moved with strong feeling. The low tone in which she answered had peculiar significance.

'Did you speak of me to Miss Moxey?'

'I must forgive you for asking that,' Peak replied, coldly. 'It may well seem to you that I have neither honour nor delicacy left.'

There had come a flush on her cheeks. For some moments she was absorbed in thought.

'It seems strange to you,' he continued at length, 'that I could ask Miss Moxey to share such a secret.'

But you must understand on what terms we were—she and I. We have known each other for several years. She has a man's mind, and I have always thought of her in much the same way as of my male companions.—Your brother has told you about her, perhaps?’

‘I have met her in London.’

‘Then that will make my explanation easier,’ said Godwin, disregarding the anxious questions that at once suggested themselves to him. ‘Well, I misled her, or tried to do so. I allowed her to suppose that I was sincere in my new undertakings, and that I didn't wish — Oh!’ he exclaimed, suddenly breaking off, ‘Why need I go any further in confession? It must be as miserable for you to hear as for me to speak. Let us make an end of it. I can't understand how I have escaped detection so long.’

Remembering every detail of Buckland's story, Sidwell felt that she had possibly been unjust in representing the Moxeys as her brother's authority; in strictness, she ought to mention that a friend of theirs was the actual source of information. But she could not pursue the subject; like Godwin, she wished to put it out of her mind. What question could there be of honour or dishonour in the case of a person such as Miss Moxey, who

had consented to be party to a shameful deceit? Strangely, it was a relief to her to have heard this. The moral repugnance which threatened to estrange her from Godwin, was now directed in another quarter; unduly restrained by love, it found scope under the guidance of jealousy.

‘You have been trying to adapt yourself,’ she said, ‘to a world for which you are by nature unfitted. Your place is in the new order; by turning back to the old, you condemned yourself to a wasted life. Since we have been in London, I have come to understand better the great difference between modern intellectual life and that which we lead in these far-away corners. You must go out among your equals, go and take your part with men who are working for the future.’

Peak rose with a gesture of passionate impatience.

‘What is it to me, new world or old? My world is where *you* are. I have no life of my own; I think only of you, live only by you.’

‘If I could help you!’ she replied, with emotion. ‘What can I do—but be your friend at a distance? Everything else has become impossible.’

‘Impossible for the present—for a long time to come. But is there no hope for me?’

She pressed her hands together, and stood before him unable to answer.

‘Remember,’ he continued, ‘that you are almost as much changed in my eyes as I in yours. I did not imagine that you had moved so far towards freedom of mind. If my love for you was profound and absorbing, think what it must now have become! Yours has suffered by my disgrace, but is there no hope of its reviving—if I live worthily—if I——?’

His voice failed.

‘I have said that we can’t be strangers,’ Sidwell murmured brokenly. ‘Wherever you go, I must hear of you.’

‘Everyone about you will detest my name. You will soon wish to forget my existence.’

‘If I know myself, never!—Oh, try to find your true work! You have such abilities, powers so much greater than those of ordinary men. You will always be the same to me, and if ever circumstances’——

‘You would have to give up so much, Sidwell. And there is little chance of my ever being well-to-do; poverty will always stand between us, if nothing else.’

‘It must be so long before we can think of that.’

‘But can I ever see you?—No, I won’t ask that. Who

knows? I may have to go too far away. But I *may* write to you—after a time?’

‘I shall live in the hope of good news from you,’ she replied, trying to smile and to speak cheerfully. ‘This will always be my home. Nothing will be changed.’

‘Then you don’t think of me as irredeemably base?’

‘If I thought you base,’ Sidwell answered, in a low voice, ‘I should not now be speaking with you. It is because I feel and know that you have erred only—that is what makes it impossible for me to think of your fault as outweighing the good in your nature.’

‘The good? I wonder how you understand that. What is there *good* in me? You don’t mean mere intellect?’

He waited anxiously for what she would say. A necessity for speaking out his inmost thoughts had arisen with the emotion, scarcely to be called hope, excited by Sidwell’s magnanimity. Now, or never, he must stand before this woman as his very self, and be convinced that she loved him for his own sake.

‘No, I don’t mean intellect,’ she replied, with hesitation.

‘What then? Tell me of one quality in me strong enough to justify a woman’s love.’

Sidwell dropped her eyes in confusion.

‘I can’t analyse your character—I only know’——

She became silent.

‘To myself,’ pursued Godwin, with the modulated, moving voice which always expressed his genuine feeling, ‘I seem anything but lovable. I don’t underrate my powers—rather the opposite, no doubt; but what I always seem to lack is the gift of pleasing—moral grace. My strongest emotions seem to be absorbed in revolt; for once that I feel tenderly, I have a hundred fierce, resentful, tempestuous moods. To be suave and smiling in common intercourse costs me an effort. I have to act the part, and this habit makes me sceptical, whenever I am really prompted to gentleness. I criticise myself ceaselessly; expose without mercy all those characteristics which another man would keep out of sight. Yes, and for this very reason, just because I think myself unlovable—the gift of love means far more to me than to other men. If you could conceive the passion of gratitude which possessed me for hours after I left you the other day! You cannot!’

Sidwell regarded him fixedly.

‘In comparison with this sincerity, what becomes of the pretence you blame in me? If you knew how paltry it

seems—that accusation of dishonesty! I believed the world round, and pretended to believe it flat: that's what it amounts to! Are you, on such an account as that, to consider worthless the devotion which has grown in me month by month? You—I was persuaded—thought the world flat, and couldn't think kindly of any man who held the other hypothesis. Very well; why not concede the trifle, and so at least give myself a chance? I did so—that was all.'

In vain her conscience strove to assert itself. She was under the spell of a nature infinitely stronger than hers; she saw and felt as Godwin did.

'You think, Sidwell, that I stand in need of forgiveness. Then be great enough to forgive me, wholly—once and for all. Let your love be strengthened by the trial it has passed through. That will mean that my whole life is yours, directed by the ever-present thought of your beauty, face and soul. Then there *will* be good in me, thanks to you. I shall no longer live a life of hypocrisy, of suppressed rage and scorn. I know how much I am asking; perhaps it means that for my sake you give up everything else that is dear to you'—

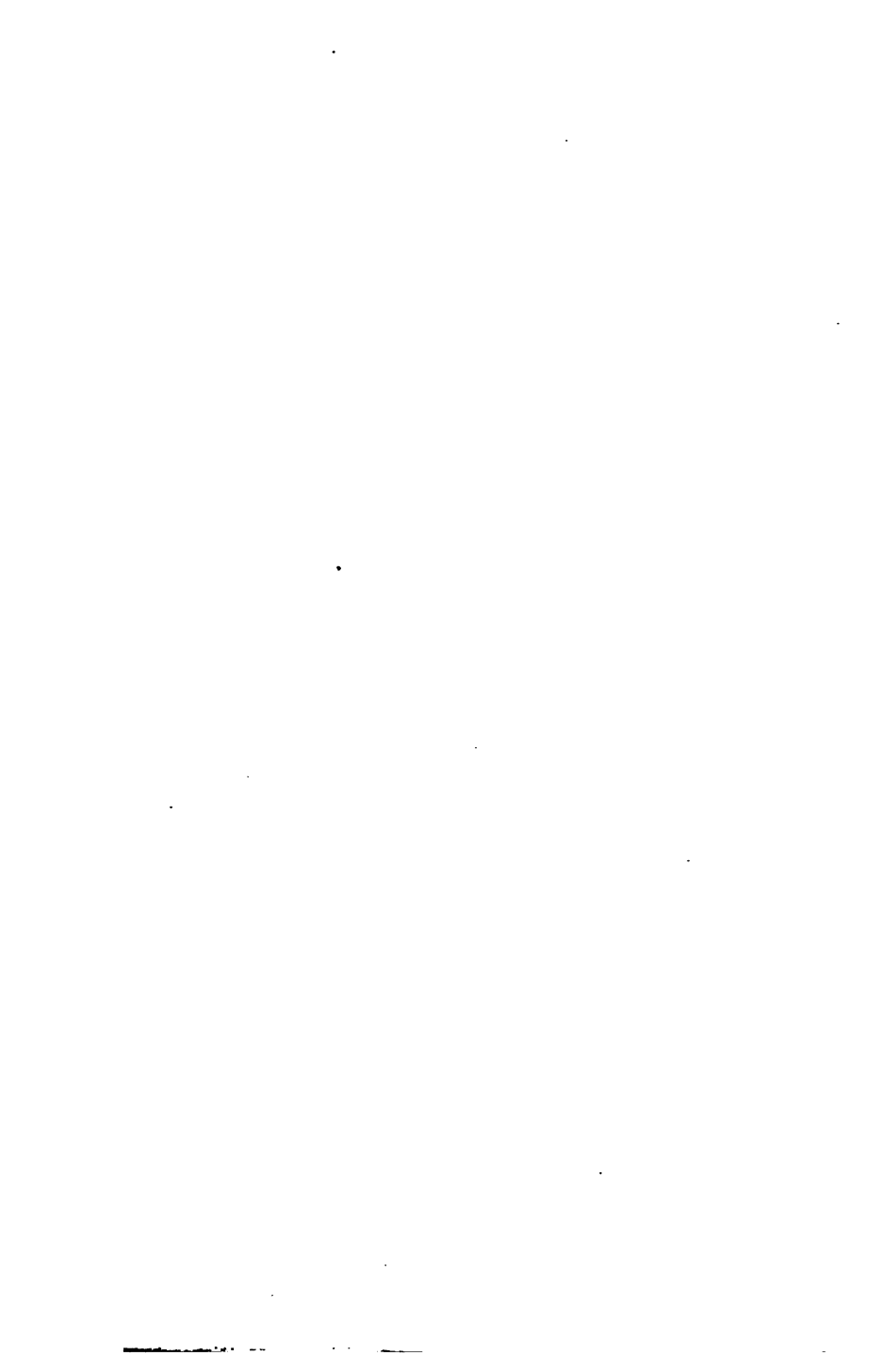
The thought checked him. He looked at her despondently.

'You can trust me,' Sidwell answered, moving nearer to him, tears on her cheeks. 'I must hear from you, and I will write.'

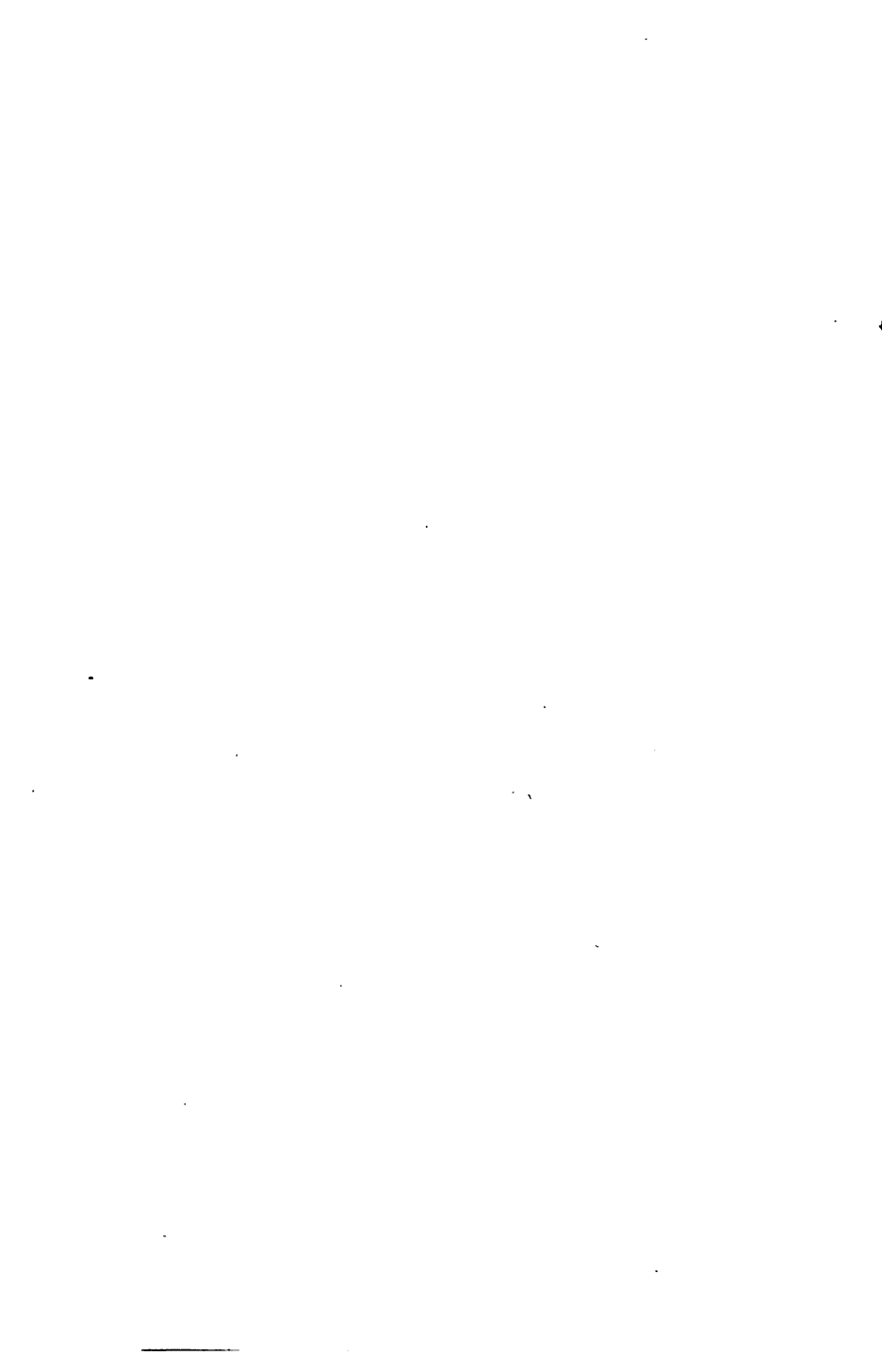
'I can ask no more than that.'

He took her hands, held them for a moment, and turned away. At the door he looked round. Sidwell's head was bowed, and, on her raising it, he saw that she was blinded with tears.

So he went forth.



PART THE SIXTH



PART THE SIXTH



I

FOR several days after the scene in which Mr. Malkin unconsciously played an important part, Marcella seemed to be ill. She appeared at meals, but neither ate nor conversed. Christian had never known her so sullen and nervously irritable; he did not venture to utter Peak's name. Upon seclusion followed restless activity. Marcella was rarely at home between breakfast and dinner-time, and her brother learnt with satisfaction that she went much among her acquaintances. Late one evening, when he had just returned from he knew not where, Christian tried to put an end to the unnatural constraint between them. After talking cheerfully for a few minutes, he risked the question :

‘Have you seen anything of the Warricombes?’

She replied with a cold negative.

‘Nor heard anything?’

‘No. Have you?’

‘Nothing at all. I have seen Earwaker. Malkin had told him about what happened here the other day.’

‘Of course.’

‘But he had no news.—Of Peak, I mean.’

Marcella smiled, as if the situation amused her; but she would not discuss it. Christian began to hope that she was training herself to a wholesome indifference.

A month of the new year went by, and Peak seemed to be forgotten. Marcella had returned to her studious habits, was fenced around with books, seldom left the house. Another month and the brother and sister were living very much in the old way, seeing few people, conversing only of intellectual things. But Christian concealed an expectation which enabled him to pass hours of retirement in the completest idleness. Since the death of her husband, Mrs. Palmer had been living abroad. Before the end of March, as he had been careful to discover, she would be back in London, at the house in Sussex Square. By that time he might venture, without indelicacy, to call upon her. And after the first interview——

The day came, when, ill with agitation, he set forth to

pay this call. For two or three nights he had scarcely closed his eyes; he looked ghastly. The weather was execrable, and on that very account he made choice of this afternoon, hoping that he might find his widowed Laura alone. Between ringing the bell and the opening of the door, he could hardly support himself. He asked for Mrs. Palmer in a gasping voice which caused the servant to look at him with surprise.

The lady was at home. At the drawing-room door, before his name could be announced, he caught the unwelcome sound of voices in lively conversation. It seemed to him that a score of persons were assembled. In reality there were six, three of them callers.

Mrs. Palmer met him with the friendliest welcome. A stranger would have thought her pretty, but by no means impressive. She was short, anything but meagre, fair-haired, brisk of movement, idly vivacious in look and tone. The mourning she wore imposed no restraint upon her humour, which at present was not far from gay.

‘Is it really Mr. Moxey?’ she exclaimed. ‘Why, I had all but forgotten you, and positively it is your own fault! It must be a year or more since you came to see me. No? Eight months?—But I have been through so much trouble, you know.’ She sighed mechanically. ‘I

thought of you one day at Bordighera, when we were looking at some funny little sea-creatures—the kind of thing you used to know all about. How is your sister?’

A chill struck upon his heart. Assuredly he had no wish to find Constance sunk in the semblance of dolour; such hypocrisy would have pained him. But her sprightliness was a shock. Though months had passed since Mr. Palmer's decease, a decent gravity would more have become her condition. He could reply only in broken phrases, and it was a relief to him when the widow, as if tiring of his awkwardness, turned her attention elsewhere.

He was at length able to survey the company. Two ladies in mourning he faintly recognised, the one a sister of Mr Palmer's, comely but of dull aspect; the other a niece, whose laugh was too frequent even had it been more musical, and who talked of athletic sports with a young man evidently better fitted to excel in that kind of thing than in any pursuit demanding intelligence. This gentleman Christian had never met. The two other callers, a grey-headed, military-looking person, and a lady, possibly his wife, were equally strangers to him.

The drawing-room was much changed in appearance

since Christian's last visit. There was more display, a richer profusion of ornaments not in the best taste. The old pictures had given place to showily-framed daubs of the most popular school. On a little table at his elbow, he remarked the photograph of a jockey who was just then engrossing public affection. What did all this mean? Formerly, he had attributed every graceful feature of the room to Constance's choice. He had imagined that to her Mr. Palmer was indebted for guidance on points of æsthetic propriety. Could it be that——?

He caught a glance which she cast in his direction, and instantly forgot the troublesome problem. How dull of him to misunderstand her! Her sportiveness had a double significance. It was the expression of a hope which would not be subdued, and at the same time a means of disguising the tender interest with which she regarded *him*. If she had been blithe before his appearance, how could she suddenly change her demeanour as soon as he entered? It would have challenged suspicion and remark. For the same reason she affected to have all but forgotten him. Of course! how could he have failed to see that? 'I thought of you one day at Bordighera'—was not that the best possible way of

making known to him that he had never been out of her mind?

Sweet, noble, long-suffering Constance!

He took a place by her sister, and began to talk of he knew not what, for all his attention was given to the sound of Constance's voice.

'Yes,' she was saying to the man of military appearance, 'it's very early to come back to London, but I did get so tired of those foreign places.'

(In other words, of being far-from her Christian—thus he interpreted.)

'No, we didn't make a single pleasant acquaintance. A shockingly tiresome lot of people wherever we went.'

(In comparison with the faithful lover, who waited, waited.)

'Foreigners are so stupid—don't you think so? Why should they always expect you to speak *their* language?—Oh, of course I speak French; but it is such a disagreeable language—don't you think so?'

(Compared with the accents of English devotion, of course.)

'Do you go in for cycling, Mr. Moxey?' inquired Mrs. Palmer's laughing niece, from a little distance.

‘For cycling?’ With a great effort he recovered himself and grasped the meaning of the words. ‘No, I—I’m sorry to say I don’t. Capital exercise!’

‘Mr. Dwight has just been telling me such an awfully good story about a friend of his. Do tell it again, Mr. Dwight! It’ll make you laugh no end, Mr. Moxey.’

The young man appealed to was ready enough to repeat his anecdote, which had to do with a bold cyclist, who, after dining more than well, rode his machine down a steep hill and escaped destruction only by miracle. Christian laughed desperately, and declared that he had never heard anything so good.

But the tension of his nerves was unendurable. Five minutes more of anguish, and he sprang up like an automaton.

‘Must you really go, Mr. Moxey?’ said Constance, with a manner which of course was intended to veil her emotion. ‘Please don’t be another year before you let us see you again.’

Blessings on her tender heart! What more could she have said, in the presence of all those people? He walked all the way to Notting Hill through a pelting rain, his passion aglow.

Impossible to be silent longer concerning the brilliant

future. Arrived at home, he flung off hat and coat, and went straight to the drawing-room, hoping to find Marcella alone. To his annoyance, a stranger was sitting there in conversation, a very simply dressed lady, who, as he entered, looked at him with a grave smile and stood up. He thought he had never seen her before.

Marcella wore a singular expression; there was a moment of silence, for Christian decidedly embarrassing, since it seemed to be expected that he should greet the stranger.

‘Don’t you remember Janet?’ said his sister.

‘Janet?’ He felt his face flush. ‘You don’t mean to say——? But how you have altered! And yet, no; really, you haven’t. It’s only my stupidity.’ He grasped her hand, and with a feeling of genuine pleasure, despite awkward reminiscences.

‘One does alter in eleven years,’ said Janet Moxey, in a very pleasant, natural voice—a voice of habitual self-command, conveying the idea of a highly cultivated mind, and many other agreeable things.

‘Eleven years? Yes, yes! How very glad I am to see you! And I’m sure Marcella was. How very kind of you to call on us!’

Janet was as far as ever from looking handsome or pretty, but it must have been a dullard who proclaimed her face unpleasing. She had eyes of remarkable intelligence, something like Marcella's, but milder, more benevolent. Her lips were softly firm; they would not readily part in laughter; their frequent smile meant more than that of the woman who sets herself to be engaging.

'I am on my way home,' she said, 'from a holiday in the South,—an enforced holiday, I'm sorry to say.'

'You have been ill?'

'Overworked a little. I am practising medicine in Kingsmill.'

Christian did not disguise his astonishment.

'Medicine?'

'You don't remember that I always had scientific tastes?'

If it was a reproach, none could have been more gently administered.

'Of course—of course I do! Your botany, your skeletons of birds and cats and mice—of course! But where did you study?'

'In London. The Women's Medical School. I have been in practice for nearly four years.'

'And have overworked yourself.—But why are we

standing? Let us sit down and talk. How is your father?’

Marcella was watching her brother closely, and with a curious smile.

Janet remained for another hour. No reference was made to the long rupture of intercourse between her family and these relatives. Christian learnt that his uncle was still hale, and that Janet's four sisters all lived, obviously unmarried. To-day he was disposed to be almost affectionate with any one who showed him a friendly face: he expressed grief that his cousin must leave for Twybridge early in the morning.

‘Whenever you pass through the Midlands,’ was Janet's indirect reply, addressed to Marcella, ‘try to stop at Kingsmill.’

And a few minutes after that she took her leave. There lingered behind her that peculiar fragrance of modern womanhood, refreshing, inspiring, which is so entirely different from the merely feminine perfume, however exquisite.

‘What a surprising visit!’ was Christian's exclamation, when he and his sister were alone. ‘How did she find us?’

‘Directory, I suppose.’

‘A lady doctor!’ he mused.

‘And a very capable one, I fancy,’ said Marcella. ‘We had nearly an hour’s talk before you came. But she won’t be able to stand the work. There’ll be another breakdown before long.’

‘Has she a large practice, then?’

‘Not very large, perhaps; but she studies as well. I never dreamt of Janet becoming so interesting a person.’

Christian had to postpone till after dinner the talk he purposed about Mrs. Palmer. When that time came, he was no longer disposed for sentimental confessions; it would be better to wait until he could announce a settled project of marriage. Through the evening, his sister recurred to the subject of Janet with curious frequency, and on the following day her interest had suffered no diminution. Christian had always taken for granted that she understood the grounds of the breach between him and his uncle; without ever unbosoming himself, he had occasionally, in his softer moments, alluded to the awkward subject in language which he thought easy enough to interpret. Now at length, in reply to some remark of Marcella’s, he said with significant accent:

‘Janet was very friendly to me.’

'She has studied science for ten years,' was his sister's comment.

'Yes, and can forgive a boy's absurdities.'

'Easier to forgive, certainly, than those of a man,' said Marcella, with a curl of the lip.

Christian became silent, and went thoughtfully away.

A week later, he was again in Mrs. Palmer's drawing-room, where again he met an assemblage of people such as seemed to profane this sanctuary. To be sure—he said to himself—Constance could not at once get rid of the acquaintances forced upon her by her husband; little by little she would free herself. It was a pity that her sister and her niece—persons anything but intelligent and refined—should be permanent members of her household; for their sake, no doubt, she felt constrained to welcome men and women for whose society she herself had little taste. But when the year of her widowhood was past——

Petrarch's Laura was the mother of eleven children; Constance had had only three, and one of these was dead. The remaining two, Christian now learnt, lived with a governess in a little house at Bournemouth, which Mrs. Palmer had taken for that purpose.

'I'm going down to see them tomorrow,' she informed

Christian, 'and I shall stay there over the next day. It's so quiet and restful.'

These words kept repeating themselves to Christian's ear, as he went home, and all through the evening. Were they not an invitation? Down there at Bournemouth, Constance would be alone the day after tomorrow. 'It is so quiet and restful'; that was to say, no idle callers would break upon her retirement; she would be able to welcome a friend, and talk reposefully with him. Surely she must have meant that; for she spoke with a peculiar intonation—a look——

By the second morning he had worked himself up to a persuasion that yonder by the seaside Constance was expecting him. To miss the opportunity would be to prove himself dull of apprehension, a laggard in love. With trembling hands, he hurried through his toilet and made haste downstairs to examine a railway time-table. He found it was possible to reach Bournemouth by about two o'clock, a very convenient hour; it would allow him to take refreshment, and walk to the house shortly after three.

His conviction strong as ever, he came to the journey's end, and in due course discovered the pleasant little house of which Constance had spoken. At the door, his

heart failed him; but retreat could not now be thought of. Yes, Mrs. Palmer was at home. The servant led him into a sitting-room on the ground floor, took his name, and left him.

It was nearly ten minutes before Constance appeared. On her face he read a frank surprise.

‘I happened to—to be down here; couldn’t resist the temptation’——

‘Delighted to see you, Mr. Moxey. But how did you know I was here?’

He gazed at her.

‘You—don’t you remember? The day before yesterday—in Sussex Square—you mentioned’——

‘Oh, did I?’ She laughed. ‘I had quite forgotten.’

Christian sank upon his chair. He tried to convince himself that she was playing a part; perhaps she thought that she had been premature in revealing her wish to talk with him.

Mrs. Palmer was good-natured. This call evidently puzzled her, but she did not stint her hospitality. When Christian asked after the children, they were summoned; two little girls daintily dressed, pretty, affectionate with their mother. The sight of them tortured Christian, and he sighed deeply with relief when they left the room.

Constance appeared rather absent; her quick glance at him signified something, but he could not determine what. In agony of constraint, he rose as if to go.

‘Oh, you will have a cup of tea with me,’ said Mrs. Palmer. ‘It will be brought in a few minutes.’

Then she really wished him to stop. Was he not behaving like an obtuse creature? Why, everything was planned to encourage him.

He talked recklessly of this and that, and got round to the years long gone by. When the tea came, he was reviving memories of occasions on which he and she had met as young people. Constance laughed merrily, declared she could hardly remember.

‘Oh, what a time ago!—But I was quite a child.’

‘No—indeed, no! You were a young lady, and a brilliant one.’

The tea seemed to intoxicate him. He noticed again that Constance glanced at him significantly. How good of her to allow him this delicious afternoon!

‘Mr. Moxey,’ she said, after meditating a little, ‘why haven’t you married? I should have thought you would have married long ago.’

He was stricken dumb. Her jerky laugh came as a shock upon his hearing.

‘Married——?’

‘What is there astonishing in the idea?’

‘But—I— How can I answer you?’

The pretty, characterless face betrayed some unusual feeling. She looked at him furtively; seemed to suppress a tendency to laugh.

‘I mustn’t pry into secrets,’ she simpered.

‘But there is no secret!’ Christian panted, laying down his teacup for fear he should drop it. ‘Whom should I—could I have married?’

Constance also put aside her cup. She was bewildered, and just a little abashed. With courage which came he knew not whence, Christian bent forward and continued speaking:

‘Whom could I marry after that day when I met you in the little drawing-room at the Robinsons?’

She stared in genuine astonishment, then was embarrassed.

‘You cannot—cannot have forgotten——?’

‘You surely don’t mean to say, Mr. Moxey, that *you* have remembered? Oh, I’m afraid I was a shocking flirt in those days!’

‘But I mean *after* your marriage—when I found you in tears’——

‘Please, please don’t remind me!’ she exclaimed, giggling nervously. ‘Oh how silly!—of me, I mean. To think that—but you are making fun of me, Mr. Moxey?’

Christian rose and went to the window. He was not only shaken by his tender emotions—something very like repugnance had begun to affect him. If Constance were feigning, it was in very bad taste; if she spoke with sincerity—what a woman had he worshipped! It did not occur to him to lay the fault upon his own absurd romanticism. After eleven years’ persistence in one point of view, he could not suddenly see the affair with the eyes of common sense.

He turned and approached her again.

‘Do you not know, then,’ he asked, with quiet dignity, ‘that ever since the day I speak of, I have devoted my life to the love I then felt? All these years, have you not understood me?’

Mrs. Palmer was quite unable to grasp ideas such as these. Neither her reading nor her experience prepared her to understand what Christian meant. Courtship of a married woman was intelligible enough to her; but a love that feared to soil itself, a devotion from afar, encouraged by only the faintest hope of reward other

than the most insubstantial—of that she had as little conception as any woman among the wealthy vulgar.

‘Do you really mean, Mr. Moxey, that you—have kept unmarried for *my* sake?’

‘You don’t know that?’ he asked, hoarsely.

‘How could I? How was I to imagine such a thing? Really, was it proper? How could you expect me, Mr. Moxey——?’

For a moment she looked offended. But her real feelings were astonishment and amusement, not unmingled with an idle gratification.

‘I must ask you to pardon me,’ said Christian, whose forehead gleamed with moisture.

‘No, don’t say that. I am really so sorry! What an odd mistake!’

‘And I have hoped in vain—since you were free——?’

‘Oh, you mustn’t say such things! I shall never dream of marrying again—never!’

There was a matter-of-fact vigour in the assertion which proved that Mrs. Palmer spoke her genuine thought. The tone could not be interpreted as devotion to her husband’s memory; it meant, plainly and simply, that she had had enough of marriage, and delighted in her freedom

Christian could not say another word. Disillusion was complete. The voice, the face, were those of as unspiritual a woman as he could easily have met with, and his life's story was that of a fool.

He took his hat, held out his hand, with 'Good-bye, Mrs. Palmer.' The cold politeness left her no choice but again to look offended, and with merely a motion of the head she replied, 'Good-bye, Mr. Moxey.'

And therewith permitted him to leave the house.

II

ON calling at Earwaker's chambers one February evening, Malkin became aware, from the very threshold of the outer door, that the domicile was not as he had known it. With the familiar fragrance of Earwaker's special 'mixture' blended a suggestion of new upholstery. The little vestibule had somehow put off its dinginess, and an unwontedly brilliant light from the sitting-room revealed changes of the interior which the visitor remarked with frank astonishment.

'What the deuce! Has it happened at last? Are you going to be married?' he cried, staring about him at unrecognised chairs, tables, and bookcases, at whitened ceiling and pleasantly papered walls, at pictures and ornaments which he knew not.

The journalist shook his head, and smiled contentedly.

'An idea that came to me all at once. My editorship seemed to inspire it.'

After a year of waiting upon Providence, Earwaker had received the offer of a substantial appointment much more to his taste than those he had previously held. He was now literary editor of a weekly review which made no kind of appeal to the untaught multitude.

‘I have decided to dwell here for the rest of my life,’ he added, looking round the walls. ‘One must have a homestead, and this shall be mine; here I have set up my penates. It’s a portion of space, you know; and what more can be said of Longleat or Chatsworth? A house I shall never want, because I shall never have a wife. And on the whole I prefer this situation to any other. I am well within reach of everything urban that I care about, and as for the country, that is too good to be put to common use; let it be kept for holiday. There’s an atmosphere in the old Inns that pleases me. The new flats are insufferable. How can one live sandwiched between a music-hall singer and a female politician? For lodgings of any kind no sane man had ever a word of approval. Reflecting on all these things, I have established myself in perpetuity.’

‘Just what I can’t do,’ exclaimed Malkin, flinging himself into a broad, deep, leather-covered chair. ‘Yet I have leanings that way. Only a few days ago I sat for

a whole evening with the map of England open before me, wondering where would be the best place to settle down—a few years hence, I mean, you know; when Bella is old enough.—That reminds me. Next Sunday is her birthday, and do you know what? I wish you'd go down to Wrotham with me.'

'Many thanks, but I think I had better not.'

'Oh, but do! I want you to see how Bella is getting on. She's grown wonderfully since you saw her in Paris—an inch taller, I should think. I don't go down there very often, you know, so I notice these changes. Really, I think no one could be more discreet than I am, under the circumstances. A friend of the family; that's all. Just dropping in for a casual cup of tea now and then. Sunday will be a special occasion, of course. I say, what are your views about early marriage? Do you think seventeen too young?'

'I should think seven-and-twenty much better.'

Malkin broke into fretfulness.

'Let me tell you, Earwaker, I don't like the way you habitually speak of this project of mine. Plainly, I don't like it. It's a very serious matter indeed—eh? What? Why are you smiling?'

'I agree with you as to its seriousness.'

'Yes, yes; but in a very cynical and offensive way. It makes me confoundedly uncomfortable, let me tell you. I don't think that's very friendly on your part. And the fact is, if it goes on I'm very much afraid we shan't see so much of each other as we have done. I like you, Earwaker, and I respect you; I think you know that. But occasionally you seem to have too little regard for one's feelings. No, I don't feel able to pass it over with a joke.—There! The deuce take it! I've bitten off the end of my pipe.'

He spat out a piece of amber, and looked ruefully at the broken stem.

'Take a cigar,' said Earwaker, fetching a box from a cupboard.

'I don't mind.—Well—what was I saying? Oh yes; I was quarrelling with you. Now, look here, what fault have you to find with Bella Jacox?'

'None whatever. She seemed to me a very amiable child.'

'Child! Pooh! pshaw! And fifteen next Sunday, I tell you. She's a young lady, and to tell you the confounded plain truth, I'm in love with her. I am, and there's nothing to be ashamed of. If you smile, we shall quarrel. I warn you, Earwaker, we shall quarrel.'

The journalist, instead of smiling, gave forth his deepest laugh. Malkin turned very red, scowled, and threw his cigar aside.

'You really wish me to go on Sunday?' Earwaker asked, in a pleasant voice.

The other's countenance immediately cleared.

'I shall take it as a great kindness. Mrs. Jacox will be delighted. Meet me at Holborn Viaduct at one-twenty-five. No, to make sure I'll come here at one o'clock.'

In a few minutes he was chatting as unconcernedly as ever.

'Talking of settling down, my brother Tom and his wife are on the point of going to New Zealand. Necessity of business; may be out there for the rest of their lives. Do you know that I shall think very seriously of following them some day? With Bella, you know. The fact of the matter is, I don't believe I could ever make a solid home in England. Why, I can't quite say; partly, I suppose, because I have nothing to do. Now there's a good deal to be said for going out to the colonies. A man feels that he is helping the spread of civilisation; and that's something, you know. I should compare myself with the Greek and Roman colonists—something

inspiring in that thought—what? Why shouldn't I found a respectable newspaper, for instance? Yes, I shall think very seriously of this.'

'You wouldn't care to run over with your relatives, just to have a look?'

'It occurred to me,' Malkin replied, thoughtfully. 'But they sail in ten days, and—well, I'm afraid I couldn't get ready in time. And then I've promised to look after some little affairs for Mrs. Jacox—some trifling money matters. But later in the year—who knows?'

Earwaker half repented of his promise to visit the Jacox household, but there was no possibility of excusing himself. So on Sunday he journeyed with his friend down to Wrotham. Mrs. Jacox and her children were very comfortably established in a small new house. When the companions entered they found the mother alone in her sitting-room, and she received them with an effusiveness very distasteful to Earwaker.

'Now you shouldn't!' was her first exclamation to Malkin. 'Indeed you shouldn't! It's really very naughty of you. O Mr. Earwaker! Who ever took so much pleasure in doing kindnesses? Do look at this *beautiful* book that Mr. Malkin has sent as a present to my little Bella. O Mr. Earwaker!'

The journalist was at once struck with her tone and manner as she addressed Malkin. He remarked that phrase, 'my little Bella,' and it occurred to him that Mrs. Jacox had been growing younger since he made her acquaintance on the towers of Notre Dame. When the girls presented themselves, they also appeared to him more juvenile; Bella, in particular, was dressed with an exaggeration of childishness decidedly not becoming. One had but to look into her face to see that she answered perfectly to Malkin's description; she was a young lady, and no child. A very pretty young lady, moreover; given to colouring, but with no silly simper; intelligent about the eyes and lips; modest, in a natural and sweet way. He conversed with her, and in doing so was disagreeably affected by certain glances she occasionally cast towards her mother. One would have said that she feared censure, though it was hard to see why.

On the return journey Earwaker made known some of his impressions, though not all.

'I like the girls,' he said, 'Bella especially. But I can't say much good of their mother.'

They were opposite each other in the railway carriage. Malkin leaned forward with earnest, anxious face.

'That's my own trouble,' he whispered. 'I'm profoundly uneasy about it. I don't think she's bringing them up at all in a proper way. Earwaker, I would pay down five thousand pounds for the possibility of taking Bella away altogether.'

The other mused.

'But, mind you,' pursued Malkin, 'she's not a *bad* woman. By no means! Thoroughly good-hearted I'm convinced; only a little weak here.' He tapped his forehead. 'I respect her, for all she has suffered, and her way of going through it. But she isn't the ideal mother, you know.'

On his way home, Malkin turned into his friend's chambers 'for five minutes.' At two in the morning he was still there, and his talk in the meanwhile had been of nothing but schemes for protecting Bella against her mother's more objectionable influences. On taking leave, he asked:

'Any news of Peak yet?'

'None. I haven't seen Moxey for a long time.'

'Do you think Peak will look you up again, if he's in London?'

'No, I think he'll keep away. And I half hope he will; I shouldn't quite know how to behave. Ten to

one he's in London now. I suppose he couldn't stay at Exeter. But he may have left England.'

They parted, and for a week did not see each other. Then, on Monday evening, when Earwaker was very busy with a mass of manuscript, the well-known knock sounded from the passage, and Malkin received admission. The look he wore was appalling, a look such as only some fearful catastrophe could warrant.

'Are you busy?' he asked in a voice very unlike his own.

Earwaker could not doubt that the trouble was this time serious. He abandoned his work, and gave himself wholly to his friend's service.

'An awful thing has happened,' Malkin began. 'How the deuce shall I tell you? Oh, the ass I have made of myself! But I couldn't help it; there seemed no way out of it.'

'Well? What?'

'It was last night, but I couldn't come to you till now. By Jove! I veritably thought of sending you a note, and then killing myself. Early this morning I was within an ace of suicide. Believe me, old friend. This is no farce.'

'I'm waiting.'

'Yes, yes; but I can't tell you all at once. Sure you're not busy? I know I pester you. I was down at Wrotham yesterday. I hadn't meant to go, but the temptation was too strong. I got there at five o'clock, and found that the girls were gone to have tea with some young friends. Well, I wasn't altogether sorry; it was a good opportunity for a little talk with their mother. And I *had* the talk. But, oh, ass that I was!'

He smote the side of his head savagely.

'Can you guess, Earwaker? Can you give a shot at what happened?'

'Perhaps I might,' replied the other gravely.

'Well?'

'That woman asked you to marry her.'

Malkin leapt from his chair, and sank back again.

'It came to that. Yes, upon my word, it came to that. She said she had fallen in love with me—that was the long and short of it. And I had never said a word that could suggest—Oh, confound it! What a frightful scene it was!'

'You took a final leave of her?'

Malkin stared with eyes of anguish into his friend's face, and at length whispered thickly:

'I said I would!'

‘What? Take leave?’

‘Marry her!’

Earwaker had much ado to check an impatiently remonstrant laugh. He paused awhile, then began his expostulation, at first treating the affair as too absurd for grave argument.

‘My boy,’ he concluded, ‘you have got into a preposterous scrape, and I see only one way out of it. You must flee. When does your brother start for the Antipodes?’

‘Thursday morning.’

‘Then you go with him; there’s an end of it.’

Malkin listened with the blank, despairing look of a man condemned to death.

‘Do you hear me?’ urged the other. ‘Go home and pack. On Thursday I’ll see you off.’

‘I can’t bring myself to that,’ came in a groan from Malkin. ‘I’ve never yet done anything to be seriously ashamed of, and I can’t run away after promising marriage. It would weigh upon me for the rest of my life.’

‘Humbug! Would it weigh upon you less to marry the mother, and all the time be in love with the daughter? To my mind, there’s something peculiarly loathsome in the suggestion.’

‘But, look here; Bella is very young, really very young indeed. It’s possible that I have deluded myself. Perhaps I don’t really care for her in the way I imagined. It’s more than likely that I might be content to regard her with fatherly affection.’

‘Even supposing that, with what sort of affection do you regard Mrs. Jacox?’

Malkin writhed on his chair before replying.

‘You mustn’t misjudge her!’ he exclaimed. ‘She is no heartless schemer. The poor thing almost cried her eyes out. It was a frightful scene. She reproached herself bitterly. What *could* I do? I have a tenderness for her, there’s no denying that. She has been so vilely used, and has borne it all so patiently. How abominable it would be if I dealt her another blow!’

The journalist raised his eyebrows, and uttered inarticulate sounds.

‘Was anything said about Bella?’ he asked, abruptly.

‘Not a word. I’m convinced she doesn’t suspect that I thought of Bella like that. The fact is, I have misled her. She thought all along that my chief interest was in *her*.’

‘Indeed? Then what was the ground of her self-reproach that you speak of?’

‘How defective you are in the appreciation of delicate feeling!’ cried Malkin frantically, starting up and rushing about the room. ‘She reproached herself for having permitted me to get entangled with a widow older than myself, and the mother of two children. What could be simpler?’

Earwaker began to appreciate the dangers of the situation. If he insisted upon his view of Mrs. Jacox’s behaviour (though it was not the harshest that the circumstances suggested, for he was disposed to believe that the widow had really lost her heart to her kind, eccentric champion), the result would probably be to confirm Malkin in his resolution of self-sacrifice. The man must be saved, if possible, from such calamity, and this would not be affected by merely demonstrating that he was on the highroad to ruin. It was necessary to try another tack.

‘It seems to me, Malkin,’ he resumed gravely, ‘that it is you who are deficient in right feeling. In offering to marry this poor woman, you did her the gravest wrong.’

‘What? How?’

‘You know that it is impossible for you to love her. You know that you will repent, and that she will be

aware of it. You are not the kind of man to conceal your emotions. Bella will grow up, and—well, the state of things won't tend to domestic felicity. For Mrs. Jacox's own sake, it is your duty to put an end to this folly before it has gone too far.'

The other gave earnest ear, but with no sign of shaken conviction.

'Yes,' he said. 'I know this is one way of looking at it. But it assumes that a man can't control himself, that his sense of honour isn't strong enough to keep him in the right way. I don't think you quite understand me. I am not a passionate man; the proof is that I have never fallen in love since I was sixteen. I think a great deal of domestic peace, a good deal more than of romantic enthusiasm. If I marry Mrs. Jacox, I shall make her a good and faithful husband,—so much I can safely say of myself.'

He waited, but Earwaker was not ready with a rejoinder.

'And there's another point. I have always admitted the defect of my character—an inability to settle down. Now, if I run away to New Zealand, with the sense of having dishonoured myself, I shall be a mere Wandering Jew for the rest of my life. All hope of redemption

will be over. Of the two courses now open to me, that of marriage with Mrs. Jacox is decidedly the less disadvantageous. Granting that I have made a fool of myself, I must abide by the result, and make the best of it. And the plain fact is, I *can't* treat her so disgracefully; I *can't* burden my conscience in this way. I believe it would end in suicide; I do, indeed.'

'This sounds all very well, but it is weakness and selfishness.'

'How can you say so?'

'There's no proving to so short-sighted a man the result of his mistaken course. I've a good mind to let you have your way just for the satisfaction of saying afterwards, "Didn't I tell you so?" You propose to behave with abominable injustice to two people, putting yourself aside. Doesn't it occur to you that Bella may already look upon you as her future husband? Haven't you done your best to plant that idea in her mind?'

Malkin started, but quickly recovered himself.

'No, I haven't! I have behaved with the utmost discretion. Bella thinks of me only as of a friend much older than herself.'

'I don't believe it!'

'Nonsense, Earwaker! A child of fifteen!'

'The other day you had quite a different view, and after seeing her again I agreed with you. She is a young girl, and if not already in love with you, is on the way to be so.'

'That will come to nothing when she hears that I am going to be her step-father.'

'Far more likely to develop into a grief that will waste the best part of her lifetime. She will be shocked and made miserable. But do as you like. I am tired of arguing.'

Earwaker affected to abandon the matter in disgust. For several minutes there was silence, then a low voice sounded from the corner where Malkin stood leaning.

'So it is your honest belief that Bella has begun to think of me in that way?'

'I am convinced of it.'

'But if I run away, I shall never see her again.'

'Why not? *She* won't run away. Come back when things have squared themselves. Write to Mrs. Jacox from the ends of the earth, and let her understand that there is no possibility of your marrying her.'

'Tell her about Bella, you mean?'

'No, that's just what I don't mean. Avoid any

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mention of the girl. Come back when she is seventeen, and, if she is willing, carry her off to be happy ever after.'

'But she may have fallen in love with someone else.'

'I think not. You must risk it, at all events.'

'Look here!' Malkin came forward eagerly. 'I'll write to Mrs. Jacox tonight, and make a full confession. I'll tell her exactly how the case stands. She's a good woman; she'll gladly sacrifice herself for the sake of her daughter.'

Earwaker was firm in resistance. He had no faith whatever in the widow's capacity for self-immolation, and foresaw that his friend would be drawn into another 'frightful scene,' resulting probably in a marriage as soon as the licence could be obtained.

'When are you to see her again?' he inquired.

'On Wednesday.'

'Will you undertake to do nothing whatever till Wednesday morning, and then to have another talk with me? I'll come and see you about ten o'clock.'

In the end Malkin was constrained into making this engagement, and not long after midnight the journalist managed to get rid of him.

On Tuesday afternoon arrived a distracted note. 'I shall keep my promise, and I won't try to see you till you come here to-morrow. But I am sore beset. I have received *three* letters from Mrs. Jacox, all long and horribly pathetic. She seems to have a presentiment that I shall forsake her. What a beast I shall be if I do! Tom comes here to-night, and I think I shall tell him all.'

The last sentence was a relief to the reader; he knew nothing of Mr. Thomas Malkin, but there was a fair presumption that this gentleman would not see his brother bent on making such a notable fool of himself without vigorous protest.

At the appointed hour next morning, Earwaker reached his friend's lodgings, which were now at Kilburn. On entering the room he saw, not the familiar figure, but a solid, dark-faced, black-whiskered man, whom a faint resemblance enabled him to identify as Malkin the younger.

'I was expecting you,' said Thomas, as they shook hands. 'My brother is completely floored. When I got here an hour ago, I insisted on his lying down, and now I think he's asleep. If you don't mind, we'll let him rest for a little. I believe he has

hardly closed his eyes since this unfortunate affair happened.'

'It rejoiced me to hear that he was going to ask your advice. How do matters stand?'

'You know Mrs. Jacox?'

Thomas was obviously a man of discretion, but less intellectual than his brother; he spoke like one who is accustomed to the management of affairs. At first he was inclined to a polite reserve, but Earwaker's conversation speedily put him more at ease.

'I have quite made up my mind,' he said presently, 'that we must take him away with us tomorrow. The voyage will bring him to his senses.'

'Of course he resists?'

'Yes, but if you will give me your help, I think we can manage him. He is not very strong-willed. In a spasmodic way he can defy everyone, but the steady pressure of common sense will prevail with him, I think.'

They had talked for half-an-hour, when the door opened and the object of their benevolent cares stood before them. He was clad in a dressing-gown, and his disordered hair heightened the look of illness which his features presented.

'Why didn't you call me?' he asked his brother, irritably. 'Earwaker, I beg a thousand pardons! I'm not very well; I've overslept myself.'

'Yes, yes; come and sit down.'

Thomas made an offer to leave them.

'Don't go,' said Malkin. 'No need whatever. You know why Earwaker has been so kind as to come here. We may as well talk it over together.'

He sat on the table, swinging a tassel of his dressing-gown round and round.

'Now, what do you really think of doing?' asked the journalist, in a kind voice.

'I don't know. I absolutely do not know. I'm unutterably wretched.'

'In that case, will you let your brother and me decide for you? We have no desire but for your good, and we are perfectly at one in our judgment.'

'Of course I know what you will propose!' cried the other, excitedly. 'From the prudential point of view, you are right, I have no doubt. But how can you protect me against remorse? If you had received letters such as these three,' he pulled them out of a pocket, 'you would be as miserable as I am. If I don't keep my promise, I shall never know another moment of peace.'

'You certainly won't if you *do* keep it,' remarked Thomas.

'No,' added Earwaker, 'and one if not two other persons will be put into the same case. Whereas by boldly facing these reproaches of conscience, you do a great kindness to the others.'

'If only you could assure me of that!'

'I *can* assure you. That is to say, I can give it as my unassailable conviction.'

And Earwaker once more enlarged upon the theme, stating it from every point of view that served his purpose.

'You're making a mountain out of a mole-heap,' was the confirmatory remark that came from Thomas. 'This respectable lady will get over her sorrows quickly enough, and some day she'll be only too glad to have you for a son-in-law, if Miss Bella still pleases you.'

'It's only right,' urged Earwaker, in pursuance of his subtler intention, 'that you should bear the worst of the suffering, for the trouble has come out of your own thoughtlessness. You are fond of saying that you have behaved with the utmost discretion; so far from that you have been outrageously indiscreet. I foresaw that something of this kind might come to pass'——

'Then why the devil didn't you warn me?' shouted Malkin, in an agony of nervous strain.

'It would have been useless. In fact, I foresaw it too late.'

The discussion continued for an hour. By careful insistence on the idea of self-sacrifice, Earwaker by degrees demolished the arguments his friend kept putting forward. Thomas, who had gone impatiently to the window, turned round with words that were meant to be final.

'It's quite decided. You begin your preparations at once, and tomorrow morning you go on board with us.'

'But if I don't go to Wrotham this afternoon, she'll be here either tonight or the first thing tomorrow. I'm sure of it!'

'By four or five o'clock,' said Earwaker, 'you can have broken up the camp. You've often done it at shorter notice. Go to an hotel for the night.'

'I must write to the poor woman.'

'Do as you like about that.'

'Who is to help her, if she gets into difficulties—as she's always doing? Who is to advise her about Bella's education? Who is to pay—I mean, who will see to——? Oh, confound it!'

The listeners glanced at each other.

‘Are her affairs in order?’ asked Earwaker. ‘Has she a sufficient income?’

‘For ordinary needs, quite sufficient. But’——

‘Then you needn’t be in the least uneasy. Let her know where you are, when the equator is between you. Watch over her interests from a distance, if you like. I can as good as promise you that Bella will wait hopefully to see her friend again.’

Malkin succumbed to argument and exhaustion. Facing Earwaker with a look of pathetic appeal, he asked hoarsely :

‘Will you stand by me till it’s over? Have you time?’

‘I can give you till five o’clock.’

‘Then I’ll go and dress. Ring the bell, Tom, and ask them to bring up some beer.’

Before three had struck, the arrangements for flight were completed. A heavily-laden cab bore away Malkin’s personal property; within sat the unhappy man and his faithful friend.

The next morning Earwaker went down to Tilbury, and said farewell to the travellers on board the steam-

ship *Orient*. Mrs. Thomas had already taken her brother-in-law under her special care.

‘It’s only three children to look after, instead of two,’ she remarked, in a laughing aside to the journalist. ‘How grateful he will be to you in a few days! And I’m sure *we* are already.’

Malkin’s eyes were no longer quite lustreless. At the last moment he talked with animation of ‘two years hence,’ and there was vigour in the waving of his hand as the vessel started seaward.

III

PEAK lost no time in leaving Exeter. To lighten his baggage, and to get rid of possessions to which hateful memories attached, he sold all his books that had any bearing on theology. The incomplete translation of *Bibel und Natur* he committed to the flames in Mrs. Roots's kitchen, scattering its black remnants with savage thrusts of the poker. Whilst engaged in packing, he debated with himself whether or not he should take leave of the few acquaintances to whom he was indebted for hospitality, and other kindness. The question was: Had Buckland Warricombe already warned these people against him? Probably it had seemed to Buckland the wiser course to be content with driving the hypocrite away; and, if this were so, regard for the future dictated a retirement from Exeter which should in no way resemble secret flight. Sidwell's influence with her

parents would perhaps withhold them from making his disgrace known, and in a few years he might be glad that he had behaved with all possible prudence. In the end, he decided to write to Mr. Lilywhite, saying that he was obliged to go away at a moment's notice, and that he feared it would be necessary altogether to change the scheme of life which he had had in view. This was the best way. From the Lilywhites, other people would hear of him, and perchance their conjectures would be charitable.

Without much hesitation he had settled his immediate plans. To London he would not return, for he dreaded the temptations to which the proximity of Sidwell would expose him, and he had no mind to meet with Moxey or Earwaker. As it was now imperative that he should find work of the old kind, he could not do better than go to Bristol, where, from the safe ground of a cheap and obscure lodging, he might make inquiries, watch advertisements, and so on. He already knew of establishments in Bristol where he might possibly obtain employment. Living with the utmost economy, he need not fall into difficulties for more than a year, and before then his good repute with the Rotherhithe firm would ensure him some position or other; if not in Bristol, then at Newcastle,

St. Helen's—any great centre of fuming and malodorous industry. He was ready to work, would delight in work. Idleness was now the intolerable thing.

So to Bristol he betook himself, and there made his temporary abode. After spending a few weeks in fruitless search for an engagement, he at length paid his oft-postponed visit to Twybridge. In the old home he felt completely a stranger, and his relatives strengthened the feeling by declaring him so changed in appearance that they hardly knew his face. With his mother only could he talk in anything like an intimate way, and the falsehoods with which he was obliged to answer her questions all but destroyed the pleasure he would otherwise have found in being affectionately tended. His sister, Mrs. Cusse, was happy in her husband, her children, and a flourishing business. Oliver was making money, and enjoyed distinction among the shopkeeping community. His aunt still dealt in millinery, and kept up her acquaintance with respectable families. To Godwin all was like a dream dreamt for the second time. He could not acknowledge any actual connection between these people and himself. But their characteristics no longer gravely offended him, and he willingly recognised the homespun worth which their lives displayed. It was

clear to him that by no possible agency of circumstances could he have been held in normal relations with his kinsfolk. However smooth his career, it must have wafted him to an immeasurable distance from Twybridge. Nature had decreed that he was to resemble the animals which, once reared, go forth in complete independence of birthplace and the ties of blood. It was a harsh fate, but in what had not fate been harsh to him? The one consolation was that he alone suffered. His mother was no doubt occasionally troubled by solicitude on his account, but she could not divine his inward miseries, and an assurance that he had no material cares sufficed to set her mind at ease.

‘You are very like your father, Godwin,’ she said, with a sigh. ‘He couldn’t rest, however well he seemed to be getting on. There was always something he wanted, and yet he didn’t know what it was.’

‘Yes, I must be like him,’ Godwin replied, smiling.

He stayed five days, then returned to Bristol. A week after that, his mother forwarded to him a letter which had come to Twybridge. He at once recognised the writing, and broke the envelope with curiosity.

‘If you should be in London,’ the note began, ‘I beg you to let me see you. There is something I have to say.’

To speak to you for a few minutes I would come any distance. Don't accuse me of behaving treacherously ; it was not my fault. I know you would rather avoid me, but do consent to hear what I have to say. If you have no intention of coming to London, will you write and let me know where you are living ? M. M.'

What could Marcella have to say to him ? Nothing surely that he at all cared to hear. No doubt she imagined that he might be in ignorance of the circumstances which had led to Buckland Warricombe's discovery ; she wished to defend herself against the suspicion of 'treachery.' He laughed carelessly, and threw her note aside.

Two months passed, and his efforts to find employment were still vain, though he had received conditional promises. The solitude of his life grew burdensome. Several times he began a letter to Sidwell, but his difficulty in writing was so great that he destroyed the attempt. In truth, he knew not how to address her. The words he penned were tumid, meaningless. He could not send professions of love, for his heart seemed to be suffering a paralysis, and the laborious artificiality of his style must have been evident. The only excuse for breaking silence would be to let her know that he had

resumed honest work; he must wait till the opportunity offered. It did not distress him to be without news of her. If she wished to write, and was only withheld by ignorance of his whereabouts, it was well; if she had no thought of sending him a word, it did not matter. He loved her, and consciously nourished hope, but for the present there was nothing intolerable in separation. His state of mind resulted partly from nervous reaction, and in part from a sense that only by silent suffering could his dignity in Sidwell's eyes be ultimately restored. Between the evil past and the hopeful future must be a complete break.

His thoughts kept turning to London, though not because Sidwell might still be there. He felt urgent need of speaking with a friend. Moxey was perhaps no longer to be considered one; but Earwaker would be tolerant of human weaknesses. To have a long talk with Earwaker would help him to recover his mental balance, to understand himself and his position better. So one morning in March, on the spur of the moment, he took train and was once more in the metropolis. On his way he had determined to send a note to Earwaker before calling at Staple Inn. He wrote it at a small hotel in Paddington, where he took a room for the night, and then spent

the evening at a theatre, as the best way of killing time.

By the first post next morning came a card, whereon Earwaker had written:—‘Be here, if you can, at two o’clock. Shall be glad to see you.’

‘So you have been new-furnishing!’ Godwin remarked, as he was admitted to the chambers. ‘You look much more comfortable.’

‘I’m glad you think so. It is the general opinion.’

They had shaken hands as though this were one of the ordinary meetings of old time, and their voices scarcely belied the appearance. Peak moved about the study, glancing at pictures and books, Earwaker eyeing him the while with not unfriendly expression. They were sincerely glad to see each other, and when Peak seated himself it was with an audible sigh of contentment.

‘And what are you doing?’ he inquired.

The journalist gave a brief account of his affairs, and Peak brightened with pleasure.

‘This is good news. I knew you would shake off the ragamuffins before long. Give me some of your back numbers, will you? I shall be curious to examine your new style.’

‘And you?—Come to live in London?’

‘No; I am at Bristol, but only waiting. There’s a chance of an analyst’s place in Lancashire; but I may give the preference to an opening I have heard of in Belgium. Better to go abroad, I think.’

‘Perhaps so.’

‘I have a question to ask you. I suppose you talked about that *Critical* article of mine *before* you received my request for silence?’

‘That’s how it was,’ Earwaker replied, calmly.

‘Yes; I understood. It doesn’t matter.’

The other puffed at his pipe, and moved uneasily.

‘I am taking for granted,’ Peak continued, ‘that you know how I have spent my time down in Devonshire.’

‘In outline. Need we trouble about the details?’

‘No. But don’t suppose that I should feel any shame in talking to you about them. That would be a confession of base motive. You and I have studied each other, and we can exchange thoughts on most subjects with mutual understanding. You know that I have only followed my convictions to their logical issue. An opportunity offered of achieving the supreme end to which my life is directed, and what scruple could stand in my way? We have nothing to do with names and epithets. *Here* are the facts of life as I had known it; *there* is the

existence promised as the reward of successful artifice. To live was to pursue the object of my being. I could not feel otherwise; therefore, could not act otherwise. You imagine me defeated, flung back into the gutter.' His words came more quickly, and the muscles of his face worked under emotion. 'It isn't so. I have a great and reasonable hope. Perhaps I have gained everything I really desired. I could tell you the strangest story, but there a scruple *does* interpose. If we live another twenty years—but now I can only talk about myself.'

'And this hope of which you speak,' said Earwaker, with a grave smile, 'points you at present to sober work among your retorts and test-tubes?'

'Yes, it does.'

'Good. Then I can put faith in the result.'

'Yet the hope began in a lie,' rejoined Peak, bitterly. 'It will always be pleasant to look back upon that, won't it? You see: by no conceivable honest effort could I have gained this point. Life utterly denied to me the satisfaction of my strongest instincts, so long as I plodded on without cause of shame; the moment I denied my faith, and put on a visage of brass, great possibilities opened before me. Of course I understand the moralist's position. It behoved me, though I knew that a barren

and solitary track would be my only treading to the end, to keep courageously onward. If I can't *believe* that any such duty is imposed upon me, where is the obligation to persevere, the morality of doing so? That is the worst hypocrisy. I have been honest, inasmuch as I have acted in accordance with my actual belief.'

'M—m—m,' muttered Earwaker, slowly. 'Then you have never been troubled with a twinge of conscience?'

'With a thousand! I have been racked, martyred. What has that to do with it? Do you suppose I attach any final significance to those torments? Conscience is the same in my view as an inherited disease which may possibly break out on any most innocent physical indulgence.—What end have I been pursuing? Is it criminal? Is it mean? I wanted to win the love of a woman—nothing more. To do that, I have had to behave like the grovelling villain who has no desire but to fill his pockets. And with success!—You understand that, Earwaker? I have succeeded! What respect can I have for the common morality, after this?'

'You have succeeded?' the other asked thoughtfully. 'I could have imagined that you had been in appearance successful'——

He paused, and Peak resumed with vehemence :

'No, not in appearance only. I can't tell you the story'——

'I don't wish you to'——

'But what I have won is won for ever. The triumph no longer rests on deceit. What I insist upon is that by deceit only was it rendered possible. If a starving man succeeds in stealing a loaf of bread, the food will benefit him no less than if he had purchased it; it is good, true sustenance, no matter how he got it. To be sure, the man may prefer starvation; he may have so strong a metaphysical faith that death is welcome in comparison with what he calls dishonour. I—I have no such faith; and millions of other men in this country would tell the blunt truth if they said the same. I have *used means*, that's all. The old way of candour led me to bitterness and cursing; by dissimulation I have won something more glorious than tongue can tell.'

It was in the endeavour to expel the subtlest enemy of his peace that Godwin dwelt so defiantly upon this view of the temptation to which he had yielded. Since his farewell interview with Sidwell, he knew no rest from the torment of a mocking voice which bade him bear in mind that all his dishonour had been superfluous, seeing that whilst he played the part of a zealous Christian, Sidwell

herself was drifting further and further from the old religion. This voice mingled with his dreams, and left not a waking hour untroubled. He refused to believe it, strove against the suggestion as a half-despairing man does against the persistent thought of suicide. If only he could obtain Earwaker's assent to the plan he put forward, it would support him in disregard of idle regrets.

'It is impossible,' said the journalist, 'for anyone to determine whether that is true or not—for you, as much as for anyone else. Be glad that you have shaken off the evil and retained the good,—no use in saying more than that.'

'Yes,' declared the other, stubbornly, 'there is good in exposing false views of life. I ought to have come utterly to grief and shame, and instead'——

'Instead——? Well?'

'What I have told you.'

'Which I interpret thus: that you have permission to redeem your character, if possible, in the eyes of a woman you have grievously misled.'

Godwin frowned.

'Who suggested this to you, Earwaker?'

'You; no one else. I don't even know who the woman is, of whom you speak.'

‘Grant you are right. As an honest man, I should never have won her faintest interest.’

‘It is absurd for us to talk about it. Think in the way that is most helpful to you,—that, no doubt, is a reasonable rule. Let us have done with all these obscurities, and come to a practical question. Can I be of any use to you? Would you care, for instance, to write an article now and then on some scientific matter that has a popular interest? I think I could promise to get that kind of thing printed for you. Or would you review an occasional book that happened to be in your line?’

Godwin reflected.

‘Thank you,’ he replied, at length. ‘I should be glad of such work—if I can get into the mood for doing it properly. That won’t be just yet; but perhaps when I have found a place’——

‘Think it over. Write to me about it.’

Peak glanced round the room.

‘You don’t know how glad I am,’ he said, ‘that your prosperity shows itself in this region of bachelordom. If I had seen you in a comfortable house, married to a woman worthy of you—I couldn’t have been sincere in my congratulations: I should have envied you so fiercely.’

‘You’re a strange fellow. Twenty years hence—as

you said just now—you will one way or another have got rid of your astounding illusions. At fifty—well, let us say at sixty—you will have a chance of seeing things without these preposterous sexual spectacles.’

‘I hope so. Every stage of life has its powers and enjoyments. When I am old, I hope to perceive and judge without passion of any kind. But is that any reason why my youth should be frustrated? We have only one life, and I want to live mine throughout.’

Soon after this Peak rose. He remembered that the journalist's time was valuable, and that he no longer had the right to demand more of it than could be granted to any casual caller. Earwaker behaved with all friendliness, but their relations had necessarily suffered a change. More than a year of separation, spent by the one in accumulating memories of dishonour, had given the other an enviable position among men ; Earwaker had his place in the social system, his growing circle of friends, his congenial labour ; perhaps—notwithstanding the tone in which he spoke of marriage—his hopes of domestic happiness. All this with no sacrifice of principle. He was fortunate in his temper, moral and intellectual ; partly directing circumstances, partly guided by their pressure, he advanced on the way of harmonious development.

Nothing great would come of his endeavours, but what he aimed at he steadily perfected. And this in spite of the adverse conditions under which he began his course. Nature had been kind to him; what more could one say?

When he went forth into the street again, Godwin felt his heart sink. His solitude was the more complete for this hour of friendly dialogue. No other companionship offered itself; if he lingered here, it must be as one of the drifting crowd, as an idle and envious spectator of the business and pleasure rife about him. He durst not approach that quarter of the town where Sidwell was living—if indeed she still remained here. Happily, the vastness of London enabled him to think of her as at a great distance; by keeping to the district in which he now wandered he was practically as remote from her as when he walked the streets of Bristol.

Yet there was one person who would welcome him eagerly if he chose to visit her. And, after all, might it not be as well if he heard what Marcella had to say to him? He could not go to the house, for it would be disagreeable to encounter Moxey; but, if he wrote, Marcella would speedily make an appointment. After an hour or two of purposeless rambling, he decided to ask

for an interview. He might learn something that really concerned him; in any case, it was a final meeting with Marcella, to whom he perhaps owed this much courtesy.

The reply was as prompt as that from Earwaker. By the morning post came a letter inviting him to call upon Miss Moxey as soon as possible before noon. She added, 'My brother is away in the country; you will meet no one here.'

By eleven o'clock he was at Notting Hill; in the drawing-room, he sat alone for two or three minutes. Marcella entered silently, and came towards him without a smile; he saw that she read his face eagerly, if not with a light of triumph in her eyes. The expression might signify that she rejoiced at having been an instrument of his discomfiture; perhaps it was nothing more than gladness at seeing him again.

'Have you come to live in London?' she asked, when they had shaken hands without a word.

'I am only here for a day or two.'

'My letter reached you without delay?'

'Yes. It was sent from Twybridge to Bristol. I didn't reply then, as I had no prospect of being in London.'

‘Will you sit down? You can stay for a few minutes?’

He seated himself awkwardly. Now that he was in Marcella’s presence, he felt that he had acted unaccountably in giving occasion for another scene between them which could only end as painfully as that at Exeter. Her emotion grew evident; he could not bear to meet the look she had fixed upon him.

‘I want to speak of what happened in this house about Christmas time,’ she resumed. ‘But I must know first what you have been told.’

‘What have *you* been told?’ he replied, with an uneasy smile. ‘How do you know that anything which happened here had any importance for me?’

‘I don’t know that it had. But I felt sure that Mr. Warricombe meant to speak to you about it.’

‘Yes, he did.’

‘But did he tell you the exact truth? Or were you led to suppose that I had broken my promise to you?’

Unwilling to introduce any mention of Sidwell, Peak preferred to simplify the story by attributing to Buckland all the information he had gathered.

‘I understood,’ he replied, ‘that Warricombe had come here in the hope of learning more about me, and that certain facts came out in general conversation. What does it matter how he learned what he did? From the day when he met you down in Devonshire, it was of course inevitable that the truth should sooner or later come out. He always suspected me.’

‘But I want you to know,’ said Marcella, ‘that I had no willing part in it. I promised you not to speak even to my brother, and I should never have done so but that Christian somehow met Mr. Warricombe, and heard him talk of you. Of course he came to me in astonishment, and for your own interest I thought it best to tell Christian what I knew. When Mr. Warricombe came here, neither Christian nor I would have enlightened him about—about your past. It happened most unfortunately that Mr. Malkin was present, and he it was who began to speak of the *Critical* article—and other things. I was powerless to prevent it.’

‘Why trouble about it? I quite believe your account.’

‘You *do* believe it? You know I would not have injured you?’

‘I am sure you had no wish to,’ Godwin replied, in as unsentimental a tone as possible. And, he added after a

moment's pause, 'Was this what you were so anxious to tell me?'

'Yes. Chiefly that.'

'Let me put your mind at rest,' pursued the other, with quiet friendliness. 'I am disposed to turn optimist; everything has happened just as it should have done. Warricombe relieved me from a false position. If *he* hadn't done so, I must very soon have done it for myself. Let us rejoice that things work together for such obvious good. A few more lessons of this kind, and we shall acknowledge that the world is the best possible.'

He laughed, but the tense expression of Marcella's features did not relax.

'You say you are living in Bristol?'

'For a time.'

'Have you abandoned Exeter?'

The word implied something that Marcella could not utter more plainly. Her face completed the question.

'And the clerical career as well,' he answered.

But he knew that she sought more than this, and his voice again broke the silence.

'Perhaps you have heard that already? Are you in communication with Miss Moorhouse?'

She shook her head.

‘But probably Warricombe has told your brother——?’

‘What?’

‘Oh, of his success in ridding Exeter of my objectionable presence.’

‘Christian hasn’t seen him again, nor have I.’

‘I only wish to assure you that I have suffered no injury. My experiment was doomed to failure. What led me to it, how I regarded it, we won’t discuss; I am as little prepared to do so now as when we talked at Exeter. That chapter in my life is happily over. As soon as I am established again in a place like that I had at Rotherhithe, I shall be quite contented.’

‘Contented?’ She smiled incredulously. ‘For how long?’

‘Who can say? I have lost the habit of looking far forward.’

Marcella kept silence so long that he concluded she had nothing more to say to him. It was an opportunity for taking leave without emotional stress, and he rose from his chair.

‘Don’t go yet,’ she said at once. ‘It wasn’t only this that I’——

Her voice was checked.

‘Can I be of any use to you in Bristol?’ Peak asked, determined to avoid the trial he saw approaching.

‘There is something more I wanted to say,’ she pursued, seeming not to hear him. ‘You pretend to be contented, but I know that is impossible. You talk of going back to a dull routine of toil, when what you most desire is freedom. I want—if I can—to help you.’

Again she failed to command her voice. Godwin raised his eyes, and was astonished at the transformation she had suddenly undergone. Her face, instead of being colourless and darkly vehement, had changed to a bright warmth, a smiling radiance such as would have become a happy girl. His look seemed to give her courage.

‘Only hear me patiently. We are such old friends—are we not? We have so often proclaimed our scorn of conventionality, and why should a conventional fear hinder what I want to say? You know—don’t you?—that I have far more money than I need or am ever likely to. I want only a few hundreds a year, and I have more than a thousand.’ She spoke more and more quickly, fearful of being interrupted. ‘Why shouldn’t I give you some of my superfluity? Let me help you in this way. Money can do so much. Take some from me, and use it as you

will—just as you will. It is useless to *me*. Why shouldn't someone whom I wish well benefit by it ?'

Godwin was not so much surprised as disconcerted. He knew that Marcella's nature was of large mould, and that whether she acted for good or evil its promptings would be anything but commonplace. The ardour with which she pleaded, and the magnitude of the benefaction she desired to bestow upon him, so affected his imagination that for the moment he stood as if doubting what reply to make. The doubt really in his mind was whether Marcella had calculated upon his weakness, and hoped to draw him within her power by the force of such an obligation, or if in truth she sought only to appease her heart with the exercise of generosity.

'You will let me?' she panted forth, watching him with brilliant eyes. 'This shall be a secret for ever between you and me. It imposes no debt of gratitude—how I despise the thought! I give you what is worthless to me,—except that it can do *you* good. But you can thank me if you will. I am not above being thanked.' She laughed unnaturally. 'Go and travel at first, as you wished to. Write me a short letter every month—every two months, just that I may know you are enjoying your life. It is agreed, isn't it?'

She held her hand to him, but Peak drew away, his face averted.

‘How can you give me the pain of refusing such an offer?’ he exclaimed, with remonstrance which was all but anger. ‘You know the thing is utterly impossible. I should be ridiculous if I argued about it for a moment.’

‘I can’t see that it is impossible.’

‘Then you must take my word for it. But I have no right to speak to you in that way,’ he added, more kindly, seeing the profound humiliation which fell upon her. ‘You meant to come to my aid at a time when I seemed to you lonely and miserable. It was a generous impulse, and I do indeed thank you. I shall always remember it and be grateful to you.’

Marcella’s face was again in shadow. Its lineaments hardened to an expression of cold, stern dignity.

‘I have made a mistake,’ she said. ‘I thought you above common ways of thinking.’

‘Yes, you put me on too high a pedestal,’ Peak answered, trying to speak humorously. ‘One of my faults is that I am apt to mistake my own position in the same way.’

‘You think yourself ambitious. Oh, if you knew really

great ambition! Go back to your laboratory, and work for wages. I would have saved you from that.'

The tone was not vehement, but the words bit all the deeper for their unimpassioned accent. Godwin could make no reply.

'I hope,' she continued, 'we may meet a few years hence. By that time you will have learnt that what I offered was not impossible. You will wish you had dared to accept it. I know what your *ambition* is. Wait till you are old enough to see it in its true light. How you will scorn yourself! Surely there was never a man who united such capacity for great things with so mean an ideal. You will never win even the paltry satisfaction on which you have set your mind—never! But you can't be made to understand that. You will throw away all the best part of your life. Meet me in a few years, and tell me the story of the interval.'

'I will engage to do that, Marcella.'

'You will? But not to tell me the truth. You will not dare to tell the truth.'

'Why not?' he asked, indifferently. 'Decidedly I shall owe it you in return for your frankness to-day. Till then—good-bye.'

She did not refuse her hand, and as he moved

away she watched him with a smile of slighting good-nature.

On the morrow Godwin was back in Bristol, and there he dwelt for another six months, a period of mental and physical lassitude. Earwaker corresponded with him, and urged him to attempt the work that had been proposed, but such effort was beyond his power.

He saw one day in a literary paper an announcement that Reusch's *Bibel und Natur* was about to be published in an English translation. So someone else had successfully finished the work he undertook nearly two years ago. He amused himself with the thought that he could ever have persevered so long in such profitless labour, and with a contemptuous laugh he muttered '*Thohu wabohu.*'

Just when the winter had set in, he received an offer of a post in chemical works at St. Helen's, and without delay travelled northwards. The appointment was a poor one, and seemed unlikely to be a step to anything better, but his resources would not last more than another half year, and employment of whatever kind came as welcome relief to the tedium of his existence. Established in his new abode, he at length wrote to Sidwell. She answered him at once in a short letter

which he might have shown to anyone, so calm were its expressions of interest, so uncompromising its words of congratulation. It began 'Dear Mr. Peak,' and ended with 'Yours sincerely.' Well, he had used the same formalities, and had uttered his feelings with scarcely more of warmth. Disappointment troubled him for a moment, and for a moment only. He was so far from Exeter, and further still from the life that he had led there. It seemed to him all but certain that Sidwell wrote coldly, with the intention of discouraging his hopes. What hope was he so foolish as to entertain? His position poorer than ever, what could justify him in writing love-letters to a girl who, even if willing to marry him, must not do so until he had a suitable home to offer her?

Since his maturity, he had never known so long a freedom from passion. One day he wrote to Earwaker: 'I begin to understand your independence with regard to women. It would be a strange thing if I became a convert to that way of thinking, but once or twice of late I have imagined that it was happening. My mind has all but recovered its tone, and I am able to read, to think—I mean really to *think*, not to muse. I get through big and solid books. Presently, if your offer

still hold good, I shall send you a scrap of writing on something or other. The pestilent atmosphere of this place seems to invigorate me. Last Saturday evening I took train, got away into the hills, and spent the Sunday geologising. And a curious experience befell me,—one I had long, long ago, in the Whitelaw days. Sitting down before some interesting strata, I lost myself in something like nirvana, grew so subject to the idea of vastness in geological time that all human desires and purposes shrivelled to ridiculous unimportance. Awaking for a minute, I tried to realise the passion which not long ago rent and racked me, but I was flatly incapable of understanding it. Will this philosophic state endure? Perhaps I have used up all my emotional energy? I hardly know whether to hope or fear it.'

, About midsummer, when his short holiday (he would only be released for a fortnight) drew near, he was surprised by another letter from Sidwell. 'I am anxious,' she wrote, 'to hear that you are well. It is more than half a year since your last letter, and of late I have been constantly expecting a few lines. The spring has been a time of trouble with us. A distant relative, an old and feeble lady who has passed her life in a little Dorsetshire village, came to see us in April, and in less

than a fortnight she was seized with illness and died. Then Fanny had an attack of bronchitis, from which even now she is not altogether recovered. On her account we are all going to Royat, and I think we shall be away until the end of September. Will you let me hear from you before I leave England, which will be in a week's time? Don't refrain from writing because you think you have no news to send. Anything that interests you is of interest to me. If it is only to tell me what you have been reading, I shall be glad of a letter.'

It was still 'Yours sincerely'; but Godwin felt that the letter meant more. In re-reading it he was pleasantly thrilled with a stirring of the old emotions. But his first impulse, to write an ardent reply, did not carry him away; he reflected and took counsel of the experience gained in his studious solitude. It was evident that by keeping silence he had caused Sidwell to throw off something of her reserve. The course dictated by prudence was to maintain an attitude of dignity, to hold himself in check. In this way he would regain what he had so disastrously lost, Sidwell's respect. There was a distinct pleasure in this exercise of self-command; it was something new to him; it flattered his pride. 'Let

her learn that, after all, I am her superior. Let her fear to lose me. Then, if her love is still to be depended upon, she will before long find a way to our union. It is in her power, if only she wills it.'

So he sat down and wrote a short letter which seemed to him a model of dignified expression.

IV

SIDWELL took no one into her confidence. The case was not one for counsel; whatever her future action, it must result from the maturing of self-knowledge, from the effect of circumstance upon her mind and heart. For the present she could live in silence.

‘We hear,’ she wrote from London to Sylvia Moorhouse, ‘that Mr. Peak has left Exeter, and that he is not likely to carry out his intention of being ordained. You, I dare say, will feel no surprise.’ Nothing more than that; and Sylvia’s comments in reply were equally brief.

Martin Warricombe, after conversations with his wife and with Buckland, felt it impossible not to seek for an understanding of Sidwell’s share in the catastrophe. He was gravely perturbed, feeling that with himself lay the chief responsibility for what had happened. Buck-

land's attitude was that of the man who can only keep repeating 'I told you so'; Mrs. Warricombe could only lament and upbraid in the worse than profitless fashion natural to women of her stamp. But in his daughter Martin had every kind of faith, and he longed to speak to her without reserve. Two days after her return from Exeter, he took Sidwell apart, and, with a distressing sense of the delicacy of the situation, tried to persuade her to frank utterance.

'I have been hearing strange reports,' he began, gravely, but without show of displeasure. 'Can you help me to understand the real facts of the case, Sidwell?—What is your view of Peak's behaviour?'

'He has deceived you, father,' was the quiet reply.

'You are convinced of that?—It allows of no——?'

'It can't be explained away. He pretended to believe what he did not and could not believe.'

'With interested motives, then?'

'Yes.—But not motives in themselves dishonourable.'

There was a pause. Sidwell had spoken in a steady voice, though with eyes cast down. Whether her father could understand a position such as Godwin's, she felt uncertain. That he would honestly endeavour to do so, there could be no doubt, especially since he must

suspect that her own desire was to distinguish between the man and his fault. But a revelation of all that had passed between her and Peak was not possible; she had the support neither of intellect nor of passion; it would be asking for guidance, the very thing she had determined not to do. Already she found it difficult to recover the impulses which had directed her in that scene of parting; to talk of it would be to see her action in such a doubtful light that she might be led to some premature and irretrievable resolve. The only trustworthy counsellor was time; on what time brought forth must depend her future.

‘Do you mean, Sidwell,’ resumed her father, ‘that you think it possible for us to overlook this deception?’

She delayed a moment, then said:

‘I don’t think it possible for you to regard him as a friend.’

Martin’s face expressed relief.

‘But will he remain in Exeter?’

‘I shouldn’t think he can.’

Again a pause. Martin was of course puzzled exceedingly, but he began to feel some assurance that Peak need not be regarded as a danger.

‘I am grieved beyond expression,’ he said at length.

‘So deliberate a fraud—it seems to me inconsistent with any of the qualities I thought I saw in him.’

‘Yes—it must.’

‘Not—perhaps—to you?’ Martin ventured, anxiously.

‘His nature is not base.’

‘Forgive me, dear.—I understand that you spoke with him after Buckland’s call at his lodgings——?’

‘Yes, I saw him.’

‘And—he strove to persuade you that he had some motive which justified his conduct?’

‘Excused, rather than justified.’

‘Not—it seems—to your satisfaction?’

‘I can’t answer that question, father. My experience of life is too slight. I can only say that untruthfulness in itself is abhorrent to me, and that I could never try to make it seem a light thing.’

‘That, surely, is a sound view, think as we may on speculative points. But allow me one more question, Sidwell. Does it seem to you that I have no choice but to break off all communication with Mr. Peak?’

It was the course dictated by his own wish, she knew. And what could be gained by any middle way between hearty goodwill and complete repudiation? Time—time alone must work out the problem.

‘Yes, I think you have no choice,’ she answered.

‘Then I must make inquiries—see if he leaves the town.’

‘Mr. Lilywhite will know, probably.’

‘I will write before long.’

So the dialogue ended, and neither sought to renew it.

Martin enjoined upon his wife a discreet avoidance of the subject. The younger members of the family were to know nothing of what had happened, and, if possible, the secret must be kept from friends at Exeter. When a fortnight had elapsed, he wrote to Mr. Lilywhite, asking whether it was true that Peak had gone away. ‘It seems that private circumstances have obliged him to give up his project of taking Orders. Possibly he has had a talk with you?’ The clergyman replied that Peak had left Exeter. ‘I have had a letter from him, explaining in general terms his change of views. It hardly surprises me that he has reconsidered the matter. I don’t think he was cut out for clerical work. He is far more likely to distinguish himself in the world of science. I suspect that conscientious scruples may have something to do with it; if so, all honour to him!’

The Warricombes prolonged their stay in London

until the end of June. On their return home, Martin was relieved to find that scarcely an inquiry was made of him concerning Peak. The young man's disappearance excited no curiosity in the good people who had come in contact with him, and who were so far from suspecting what a notable figure had passed across their placid vision. One person only was urgent in his questioning. On an afternoon when Mrs. Warricombe and her daughters were alone, the Rev. Bruno Chilvers made a call.

'Oh!' he exclaimed, after a few minutes' conversation, 'I am so anxious to ask you what has become of Mr. Peak. Soon after my arrival in Exeter, I went to see him, and we had a long talk—a most interesting talk. Then I heard all at once that he was gone, and that we should see no more of him. Where is he? What is he doing?'

There was a barely appreciable delay before Mrs. Warricombe made answer.

'We have quite lost sight of him,' she said, with an artificial smile. 'We know only that he was called away on some urgent business—family affairs, I suppose.'

Chilvers, in the most natural way, glanced from

the speaker to Sidwell, and instantly, without the slightest change of expression, brought his eyes back again.

‘I hope most earnestly,’ he went on, in his fluty tone, ‘that he will return. A most interesting man! A man of *large* intellectual scope, and really *broad* sympathies. I looked forward to many a chat with him. Has he, I wonder, been led to change his views? Possibly he would find a secular sphere more adapted to his special powers.’

Mrs. Warricombe had nothing to say. Sidwell, finding that Mr. Chilvers’ smile now beamed in her direction, replied to him with steady utterance:

‘It isn’t uncommon, I think, nowadays, for doubts to interfere with the course of study for ordination?’

‘Far from uncommon!’ exclaimed the Rector of St. Margaret’s, with almost joyous admission of the fact. ‘Very far from uncommon. Such students have my profound sympathy. I know from experience exactly what it means to be overcome in a struggle with the modern spirit. Happily for myself, I was enabled to recover what for a time I lost. But charity forbid that I should judge those who think they must needs voyage for ever in “sunless gulfs of doubt,” or even absolutely

deny that the human intellect can be enlightened from above.'

At a loss even to follow this rhetoric, Mrs. Warricombe, who was delighted to welcome the Rev. Bruno, and regarded him as a gleaming pillar of the Church, made haste to introduce a safer topic. After that, Mr. Chilvers was seen at the house with some frequency. Not that he paid more attention to the Warricombes than to his other acquaintances. Relieved by his curate from the uncongenial burden of mere parish affairs, he seemed to regard himself as an apostle at large, whose mission directed him to the households of well-to-do people throughout the city. His brother clergymen held him in slight esteem. In private talk with Martin Warricombe, Mr. Lilywhite did not hesitate to call him 'a mountebank,' and to add other depreciatory remarks.

'My wife tells me—and I can trust her judgment in such things—that his sole object just now is to make a good marriage. Rather disagreeable stories seem to have followed him from the other side of England. He makes love to all unmarried women—never going beyond what is thought permissible, but doing a good deal of mischief, I fancy. One lady in Exeter—I won't mention names—has already pulled him up with a direct inquiry as to his

intentions; at her house, I imagine, he will no more be seen.'

The genial parson chuckled over his narrative, and Martin, by no means predisposed in the Rev. Bruno's favour, took care to report these matters to his wife.

'I don't believe a word of it!' exclaimed Mrs. Warricombe. 'All the clergy are jealous of Mr. Chilvers.'

'What? Of his success with ladies?'

'Martin! It is something new for you to be profane! —They are jealous of his high reputation.'

'Rather a serious charge against our respectable friends.'

'And the stories are all nonsense,' pursued Mrs. Warricombe. 'It's very wrong of Mr. Lilywhite to report such things. I don't believe any other clergyman would have done so.'

Martin smiled—as he had been accustomed to do all through his married life—and let the discussion rest there. On the next occasion of Mr. Chilvers being at the house, he observed the reverend man's behaviour with Sidwell, and was not at all pleased. Bruno had a way of addressing women which certainly went beyond the ordinary limits of courtesy. At a little distance, anyone

would have concluded that he was doing his best to excite Sidwell's affectionate interest. The matter of his discourse might be unobjectionable, but the manner of it was not in good taste.

Mrs. Warricombe was likewise observant, but with other emotions. To her it seemed a subject for pleasurable reflection, that Mr. Chilvers should show interest in Sidwell. The Rev. Bruno had bright prospects. With the colour of his orthodoxy she did not concern herself. He was ticketed 'broad,' a term which carried with it no disparagement; and Sidwell's sympathies were altogether with the men of 'breadth.' The time drew near when Sidwell must marry, if she ever meant to do so, and in comparison with such candidates as Mr. Walsh and Godwin Peak, the Rector of St. Margaret's would be an ideal husband for her. Sidwell's attitude towards Mr. Chilvers was not encouraging, but Mrs. Warricombe suspected that a lingering regard for the impostor, so lately unmasked, still troubled her daughter's mind: a new suitor, even if rejected, would help the poor girl to dismiss that shocking infatuation.

Sidwell and her father nowadays spent much time together, and in the autumn days it became usual for them to have an afternoon ramble about the lanes.

Their talk was of science and literature, occasionally skirting very close upon those questions which both feared to discuss plainly—for a twofold reason. Sidwell read much more than had been her wont, and her choice of authors would alone have indicated a change in her ways of thinking, even if she had not allowed it to appear in the tenor of her talk. The questions she put with reference to Martin's favourite studies were sometimes embarrassing.

One day they happened to meet Mr. Chilvers, who was driving with his eldest child, a boy of four. The narrowness of the road made it impossible—as Martin would have wished—to greet and pass on. Chilvers stopped the carriage and jumped out. Sidwell could not but pay some attention to the youthful Chilvers.

‘Till he is ten years old,’ cried Bruno, ‘I shall think much more of his body than of his mind. In fact, at this age the body is the mind. Books, books—oh, we attach far too much importance to them. Over-study is one of the morbid tendencies of our time. Some one or other has been trying to frown down what he calls the excessive athleticism of our public schools. No, no! Let us rejoice that our lads have such an opportunity of vigorous physical development. The

culture of the body is a great part of religion.' He always uttered remarks of this kind as if suggesting that his hearers should note them in a collection of aphorisms. 'If to labour is to pray, so also is the practice of open-air recreation.'

When they had succeeded in getting away, father and daughter walked for some minutes without speaking. At length Sidwell asked, with a smile :

'How does this form of Christianity strike you?'

'Why, very much like a box on the ear with a perfumed glove,' replied Martin.

'That describes it very well.'

They walked a little further, and Sidwell spoke in a more serious tone.

'If Mr. Chilvers were brought before the ecclesiastical authorities and compelled to make a clear statement of his faith, what sect, in all the history of heresies, would he really seem to belong to?'

'I know too little of him, and too little of heresies.'

'Do you suppose for a moment that he sincerely believes the dogmas of his Church?'

Martin bit his lip and looked uneasy.

'We can't judge him, Sidwell.'

'I don't know,' she persisted. 'It seems to me that

he does his best to give us the means of judging him. I half believe that he often laughs in himself at the success of his audacity.'

'No, no. I think the man is sincere.'

This was very uncomfortable ground, but Sidwell would not avoid it. Her eyes flashed, and she spoke with a vehemence such as Martin had never seen in her.

'Undoubtedly sincere in his determination to make a figure in the world. But a Christian, in any intelligible sense of that much-abused word,—no! He is one type of the successful man of our day. Where thousands of better and stronger men struggle vainly for fair recognition, he and his kind are glorified. In comparison with a really energetic man, he is an acrobat. The crowd stares at him and applauds, and there is nothing he cares for so much as that kind of admiration.'

Martin kept silence, and in a few minutes succeeded in broaching a wholly different subject.

Not long after this, Mr. Chilvers paid a call at the conventional hour. Sidwell, hoping to escape, invited two girls to step out with her on to the lawn. The sun was sinking, and, as she stood with eyes fixed upon it, the Rev. Bruno's voice disagreeably broke her reverie. She was perforce involved in a dialogue, her companions moving aside.

'What a magnificent sky!' murmured Chilvers. "There sinks the nebulous star." Forgive me, I have fallen into a tiresome trick of quoting. How differently a sunset is viewed nowadays from what it was in old times! Our impersonal emotions are on a higher plane—don't you think so? Yes, scientific discovery has done more for religion than all the ages of pious imagination. A theory of Galileo or Newton is more to the soul than a psalm of David.'

'You think so?' Sidwell asked, coldly.

In everyday conversation she was less suave than formerly. This summer she had never worn her spray of sweet-brier, and the omission might have been deemed significant of a change in herself. When the occasion offered, she no longer hesitated to express a difference of opinion; at times she uttered her dissent with a bluntness which recalled Buckland's manner in private.

'Does the comparison seem to you unbecoming?' said Chilvers, with genial condescension. 'Or untrue?'

'What do you mean by "the soul"?' she inquired, still gazing away from him.

'The principle of conscious life in man—that which understands and worships.'

'The two faculties seem to me so different that'——

She broke off. 'But I mustn't talk foolishly about such things.'

'I feel sure you have thought of them to some purpose. I wonder whether you ever read Francis Newman's book on *The Soul* ?'

'No, I never saw it.'

'Allow me to recommend it to you. I believe you would find it deeply interesting.'

'Does the Church approve it ?'

'The Church ?' He smiled. 'Ah ! what Church ? Churchmen there are, unfortunately, who detest the name of its author, but I hope you have never classed me among them. The Church, rightly understood, comprehends every mind and heart that is striving upwards. The age of intolerance will soon be as remote from us as that of persecution. Can I be mistaken in thinking that this broader view has your sympathy, Miss Warricombe ?'

'I can't sympathise with what I don't understand, Mr. Chilvers.'

He looked at her with tender solicitude, bending slightly from his usual square-shouldered attitude.

'Do let me find an opportunity of talking over the whole matter with you—by no means as an instructor.

In my view, a clergyman may seek instruction from the humblest of those who are called his flock. The thoughtful and high-minded among them will often assist him materially in his endeavour at self-development. To my "flock," he continued, playfully, 'you don't belong; but may I not count you one of that circle of friends to whom I look for the higher kind of sympathy?'

Sidwell glanced about her in the hope that some one might be approaching. Her two friends were at a distance, talking and laughing together.

'You shall tell me some day,' she replied, with more attention to courtesy, 'what the doctrines of the Broad Church really are. But the air grows too cool to be pleasant; hadn't we better return to the drawing-room?'

The greater part of the winter went by before she had again to submit to a *tête-à-tête* with the Rev. Bruno. It was seldom that she thought of him save when compelled to do so by his exacting presence, but in the meantime he exercised no small influence on her mental life. Insensibly she was confirmed in her alienation from all accepted forms of religious faith. Whether she wished it or not, it was inevitable that such a process

should keep her constantly in mind of Godwin Peak. Her desire to talk with him at times became so like passion that she appeared to herself to love him more truly than ever. Yet such a mood was always followed by doubt, and she could not say whether the reaction distressed or soothed her. These months that had gone by brought one result, not to be disguised. Whatever the true nature of her feeling for Godwin, the thought of marrying him was so difficult to face that it seemed to involve impossibilities. He himself had warned her that marriage would mean severance from all her kindred. It was practically true, and time would only increase the difficulty of such a determination.

The very fact that her love (again, if love it were) must be indulged in defiance of universal opinion tended to keep emotion alive. A woman is disposed to cling to a lover who has disgraced himself, especially if she can believe that the disgrace was incurred as a result of devotion to her. Could love be separated from thought of marriage, Sidwell would have encouraged herself in fidelity, happy in the prospect of a life-long spiritual communion—for she would not doubt of Godwin's upward progress, of his eventual purification. But this was a mere dream. If Godwin's passion were steadfast,

the day would come when she must decide either to cast in her lot with his, or to bid him be free. And could she imagine herself going forth into exile?

There came a letter from him, and she was fortunate enough to receive it without the knowledge of her relatives. He wrote that he had obtained employment. The news gave her a troubled joy, lasting for several days. That no emotion appeared in her reply was due to a fear lest she might be guilty of misleading him. Perhaps already she had done so. Her last whisper—'Some day!'—was it not a promise and an appeal? Now she had not the excuse of profound agitation, there must be no word her conscience could not justify. But in writing those formal lines she felt herself a coward. She was drawing back—preparing her escape.

Often she had the letter beneath her pillow. It was the first she had ever received from a man who professed to love her. So long without romance in her life, she could not but entertain this semblance of it, and feel that she was still young.

It told much in Godwin's favour that he had not ventured to write before there was this news to send her. It testified to the force of his character, the purity of his purpose. A weaker man, she knew, would have tried to

excite her compassion by letters of mournful strain, might even have distressed her with attempts at clandestine meeting. She had said rightly—his nature was not base. And she loved him! She was passionately grateful to him for proving that her love had not been unworthily bestowed.

When he wrote again, her answer should not be cowardly.

The life of the household went on as it had been wont to do for years, but with the spring came events. An old lady died whilst on a visit to the house (she was a half-sister of Mrs. Warricombe), and by a will executed a few years previously she left a thousand pounds, to be equally divided between the children of this family. Sidwell smiled sadly on finding herself in possession of this bequest, the first sum of any importance that she had ever held in her own right. If she married a man of whom all her kith and kin so strongly disapproved that they would not give her even a wedding present, two hundred and fifty pounds would be better than no dowry at all. One could furnish a house with it.

Then Fanny had an attack of bronchitis, and whilst she was recovering Buckland came down for a few

days, bringing with him a piece of news for which no one was prepared. As if to make reparation to his elder sister for the harshness with which he had behaved in the affair of Godwin Peak, he chose her for his first confidante.

‘Sidwell, I am going to be married. Do you care to hear about it?’

‘Certainly I do.’

Long ago she had been assured of Sylvia Moorhouse’s sincerity in rejecting Buckland’s suit. That was still a grief to her, but she acknowledged her friend’s wisdom, and was now very curious to learn who it was that the Radical had honoured with his transferred affections.

‘The lady’s name,’ Buckland began, ‘is Miss Matilda Renshaw. She is the second daughter of a dealer in hides, tallow, and that kind of thing. Both her parents are dead; she has lived of late with her married sister at Blackheath.’

Sidwell listened with no slight astonishment, and her countenance looked what she felt.

‘That’s the bald statement of the cause,’ pursued her brother, seeming to enjoy the consternation he had excited. ‘Now, let me fill up the outline. Miss

Renshaw is something more than good-looking, has had an admirable education, is five-and-twenty, and for a couple of years has been actively engaged in humanitarian work in the East End. She has published a book on social questions, and is a very good public speaker. Finally, she owns property representing between three and four thousand a year.'

'The picture has become more attractive,' said Sidwell.

'You imagined a rather different person? If I persuade mother to invite her down here presently, do you think you could be friendly with her?'

'I see no reason why I should not be.'

'But I must warn you. She has nothing to do with creeds and dogmas.'

He tried to read her face. Sidwell's mind was a mystery to him.

'I shall make no inquiry about her religious views,' his sister replied, in a dispassionate tone, which conveyed no certain meaning.

'Then I feel sure you will like her, and equally sure that she will like you.'

His parents had no distinct fault to find with this choice, though they would both greatly have preferred

a daughter-in-law whose genealogy could be more freely spoken of. Miss Renshaw was invited to Exeter, and the first week of June saw her arrival. Buckland had in no way exaggerated her qualities. She was a dark-eyed beauty, perfect from the social point of view, a very interesting talker,—in short, no ordinary woman. That Buckland should have fallen in love with her, even after Sylvia, was easily understood; it seemed likely that she would make him as good a wife as he could ever hope to win.

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Sidwell was expecting another letter from the north of England. The silence which during those first months had been justifiable was now a source of anxiety. But whether fear or hope predominated in her expectancy, she still could not decide. She had said to herself that her next reply should not be cowardly, yet she was as far as ever from a courageous resolve.

Mental harassment told upon her health. Martin, watching her with solicitude, declared that for her sake as much as for Fanny's they must have a thorough holiday abroad.

Urged by the approaching departure, Sidwell overcame her reluctance to write to Godwin before she

had a letter to answer. It was done in a mood of intolerable despondency, when life looked barren before her, and the desire of love all but triumphed over every other consideration. The letter written and posted, she would gladly have recovered it—reserved, formal as it was. Cowardly still; but then Godwin had not written.

She kept a watch upon the postman, and again, when Godwin's reply was delivered, escaped detection.

Hardly did she dare to open the envelope. Her letter had perchance been more significant than she supposed; and did not the mere fact of her writing invite a lover's frankness?

But the reply was hardly more moving than if it had come from a total stranger. For a moment she felt relieved; in an hour's time she suffered indescribable distress. Godwin wrote—so she convinced herself after repeated perusals—as if discharging a task; not a word suggested tenderness. Had the letter been unsolicited, she could have used it like the former one; but it was the answer to an appeal. The phrases she had used were still present in her mind. 'I am anxious . . . it is more than half a year since you wrote . . . I have been expecting . . . anything that is of interest to you will interest me . . .' How

could she imagine that this was reserved and formal? Shame fell upon her; she locked herself from all companionship, and wept in rebellion against the laws of life.

A fortnight later, she wrote from Royat to Sylvia Moorhouse. It was a long epistle, full of sunny descriptions, breathing renewed vigour of body and mind. The last paragraph ran thus:

‘Yesterday was my birthday; I was twenty-eight. At this age, it is wisdom in a woman to remind herself that youth is over. I don’t regret it; let it go with all its follies! But I am sorry that I have no serious work in life; it is not cheerful to look forward to perhaps another eight-and-twenty years of elegant leisure—that is to say, of wearisome idleness. What can I do? Try and think of some task for me, something that will last a lifetime.’

PART THE SEVENTH

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I

AT the close of a sultry day in September, when factory fumes hung low over the town of St. Helen's, and twilight thickened luridly, and the air tasted of sulphur, and the noises of the streets, muffled in their joint effect, had individually an ominous distinctness, Godwin Peak walked with languid steps to his lodgings and the meal that there awaited him. His vitality was at low ebb. The routine of his life disgusted him; the hope of release was a mockery. What was to be the limit of this effort to redeem his character? How many years before the past could be forgotten, and his claim to the style of honourable be deemed secure? Rubbish! It was an idea out of old-fashioned romances. What he was, he was, and no extent of dogged duration at

St. Helen's or elsewhere, could affect his personality. What, practically, was to be the end? If Sidwell had no money of her own, and no expectations from her father, how could she ever become his wife? Women liked this kind of thing, this indefinite engagement to marry when something should happen, which in all likelihood never would happen—this fantastic mutual fidelity with only the airiest reward. Especially women of a certain age.

A heavy cart seemed to be rumbling in the next street. No, it was thunder. If only a good rattling storm would sweep the bituminous atmosphere, and allow a breath of pure air before midnight.

She could not be far from thirty. Of course there prevails much conventional nonsense about women's age; there are plenty of women who reckon four decades, and yet retain all the essential charm of their sex. And as a man gets older, as he begins to persuade himself that at forty one has scarce reached the prime of life——

The storm was coming on in earnest. Big drops began to fall. He quickened his pace, reached home, and rang the bell for a light.

His landlady came in with the announcement that

a gentleman had called to see him, about an hour ago; he would come again at seven o'clock.

‘What name?’

None had been given. A youngish gentleman, speaking like a Londoner.

It might be Earwaker, but that was not likely. Godwin sat down to his plain meal, and after it lit a pipe. Thunder was still rolling, but now in the distance. He waited impatiently for seven o'clock.

To the minute, sounded a knock at the house-door. A little delay, and there appeared Christian Moxey.

Godwin was surprised and embarrassed. His visitor had a very grave face, and was thinner, paler, than three years ago; he appeared to hesitate, but at length offered his hand.

‘I got your address from Earwaker. I was obliged to see you—on business.’

‘Business?’

‘May I take my coat off? We shall have to talk.’

They sat down, and Godwin, unable to strike the note of friendship lest he should be met with repulse,

broke silence by regretting that Moxey should have had to make a second call.

‘Oh, that’s nothing! I went and had dinner.—Peak, my sister is dead.’ .

Their eyes met; something of the old kindness rose to either face.

‘That must be a heavy blow to you,’ murmured Godwin, possessed with a strange anticipation which he would not allow to take clear form.

‘It is. She was ill for three months. Whilst staying in the country last June she met with an accident. She went for a long walk alone one day, and in a steep lane she came up with a carter who was trying to make a wretched horse drag a load beyond its strength. The fellow was perhaps half drunk; he stood there beating the horse unmercifully. Marcella couldn’t endure that kind of thing—impossible for her to pass on and say nothing. She interfered, and tried to persuade the man to lighten his cart. He was insolent, attacked the horse more furiously than ever, and kicked it so violently in the stomach that it fell. Even then he wouldn’t stop his brutality. Marcella tried to get between him and the animal—just as it lashed out with its heels. The poor girl was so badly injured that she lay by the roadside

until another carter took her up and brought her back to the village. Three months of accursed suffering, and then happily came the end.'

A far, faint echoing of thunder filled the silence of their voices. Heavy rain splashed upon the pavement.

'She said to me just before her death,' resumed Christian, "'I have ill luck when I try to do a kindness—but perhaps there is one more chance." I didn't know what she meant till afterwards. Peak, she has left nearly all her money to you.'

Godwin knew it before the words were spoken. His heart leaped, and only the dread of being observed enabled him to control his features. When his tongue was released he said harshly:

'Of course I can't accept it.'

The words were uttered independently of his will. He had no such thought, and the sound of his voice shook him with alarm.

'Why can't you?' returned Christian.

'I have no right—it belongs to you, or to some other relative—it would be'——

His stammering broke off. Flushes and chills ran through him; he could not raise his eyes from the ground.

‘It belongs to no one but you,’ said Moxey, with cold persistence. ‘Her last wish was to do you a kindness, and I, at all events, shall never consent to frustrate her intention. The legacy represents something more than eight hundred a year, as the investments now stand. This will make you independent—of everything and everybody.’ He looked meaningly at the listener. ‘Her own life was not a very happy one; she did what she could to save yours from a like doom.’

Godwin at last looked up.

‘Did she speak of me during her illness?’

‘She asked me once, soon after the accident, what had become of you. As I knew from Earwaker, I was able to tell her.’

A long silence followed. Christian’s voice was softer when he resumed.

‘You never knew her. She was the one woman in ten thousand—at once strong and gentle; a fine intellect, and a heart of rare tenderness. But because she had not the kind of face that’——

He checked himself.

‘To the end her mind kept its clearness and courage. One day she reminded me of Heine—how we had talked of that “conversion” on the mattress-grave, and had

pitied the noble intellect subdued by disease. "I shan't live long enough," she said, "to incur that danger. What I have thought ever since I could study, I think now, and shall to the last moment." I buried her without forms of any kind, in the cemetery at Kingsmill. That was what she wished. I should have despised myself if I had lacked that courage.'

'It was right,' muttered Godwin.

'And I wear no mourning, you see. All that kind of thing is ignoble. I am robbed of a priceless companionship, but I don't care to go about inviting people's pity. If only I could forget those months of suffering! Some day I shall, perhaps, and think of her only as she lived.'

'Were you alone with her all the time?'

'No. Our cousin Janet was often with us.' Christian spoke with averted face. 'You don't know, of course, that she has gone in for medical work—practises at Kingsmill. The accident was at a village called Lowton, ten miles or more from Kingsmill. Janet came over very often.'

Godwin mused on this development of the girl whom he remembered so well. He could not direct his thoughts; a languor had crept over him.

‘Do you recollect, Peak,’ said Christian presently, ‘the talk we had in the fields by Twybridge, when we first met?’

The old friendliness was reappearing in his manner. He was yielding to the impulse to be communicative, confidential, which had always characterised him.

‘I remember,’ Godwin murmured.

‘If only my words then had had any weight with you! And if only I had acted upon my own advice! Just for those few weeks I was sane; I understood something of life; I saw my true way before me. You and I have both gone after ruinous ideals, instead of taking the solid good held out to us. Of course, I know your story in outline. I don’t ask you to talk about it. You are independent now, and I hope you can use your freedom.—Well, and I too am free.’

The last words were in a lower tone. Godwin glanced at the speaker, whose sadness was not banished, but illumined with a ray of calm hope.

‘Have you ever thought of me and my infatuation?’ Christian asked.

‘Yes.’

‘I have outlived that mawkish folly. I used to drink too much; the two things went well together. It would

shame me to tell you all about it. But, happily, I have been able to go back about thirteen years—recover my old sane self—and with it what I then threw away.’

‘I understand.’

‘Do you? Marcella knew of it, just before her death, and it made her glad. But the waste of years, the best part of a lifetime! It’s incredible to me as I look back. Janet called on us one day in London. Heaven be thanked that she was forgiving enough to do so! What would have become of me now?’

‘How are you going to live, then?’ Godwin asked, absently.

‘How? My income is sufficient’——

‘No, no; I mean, where and how will you live in your married life?’

‘That’s still uncertain. Janet mustn’t go on with professional work. In any case, I don’t think she could for long; her strength isn’t equal to it. But I shouldn’t wonder if we settle in Kingsmill. To you it would seem intolerable? But why should we live in London? At Kingsmill Janet has a large circle of friends; in London we know scarcely half-a-dozen people—of the kind it would give us any pleasure to live with. We shall have no lack of intellectual society; Janet knows some of the

Whitelaw professors. The atmosphere of Kingsmill isn't illiberal, you know; we shan't be fought shy of because we object to pass Sundays in a state of coma. But the years that I have lost! The irrecoverable years!

'There's nothing so idle as regretting the past,' said Godwin, with some impatience. 'Why groan over what couldn't be otherwise? The probability is, Janet and you are far better suited to each other now than you ever would have been if you had married long ago.'

'You think that?' exclaimed the other eagerly. 'I have tried to see it in that light. If I didn't feel so despicable!'

'She, I take it, doesn't think you so,' Godwin muttered.

'But how can she understand? I have tried to tell her everything, but she refused to listen. Perhaps Marcella told her all she cared to know.'

'No doubt.'

Each brooded for a while over his own affairs, then Christian reverted to the subject which concerned them both.

'Let us speak frankly. You will take this gift of Marcella's as it was meant?'

How *was* it meant? Critic and analyst as ever, Godwin could not be content to see in it the simple

benefaction of a woman who died loving him. Was it not rather the last subtle device of jealousy? Marcella knew that the legacy would be a temptation he could scarcely resist—and knew at the same time that, if he accepted it, he practically renounced his hope of marrying Sidwell Warricombe. Doubtless she had learned as much as she needed to know of Sidwell's position. Refusing this bequest, he was as far as ever from the possibility of asking Sidwell to marry him. Profiting by it, he stood for ever indebted to Marcella, must needs be grateful to her, and some day, assuredly, would reveal the truth to whatever woman became his wife. Conflict of reasonings and emotions made it difficult to answer Moxey's question.

'I must take time to think of it,' he said, at length.

'Well, I suppose that is right. But—well, I know so little of your circumstances'——

'Is that strictly true?' Peak asked.

'Yes. I have only the vaguest idea of what you have been doing since you left us. Of course I have tried to find out.'

Godwin smiled, rather gloomily.

'We won't talk of it. I suppose you stay in St. Helen's for the night?'

'There's a train at 10.20. I had better go by it.'

'Then let us forget everything but your own cheerful outlook. At ten, I'll walk with you to the station.'

Reluctantly at first, but before long with a quiet abandonment to the joy that would not be suppressed, Christian talked of his future wife. In Janet he found every perfection. Her mind was something more than the companion of his own. Already she had begun to inspire him with a hopeful activity, and to foster the elements of true manliness which he was conscious of possessing, though they had never yet had free play. With a sense of luxurious safety, he submitted to her influence, knowing none the less that it was in his power to complete her imperfect life. Studiously he avoided the word 'ideal'; from such vaporous illusions he had turned to the world's actualities; his language dealt with concretes, with homely satisfactions, with prospects near enough to be soberly examined.

A hurry to catch the train facilitated parting. Godwin promised to write in a few days.

He took a roundabout way back to his lodgings. The rain was over, the sky had become placid. He was conscious of an effect from Christian's conversation which half counteracted the mood he would otherwise have indulged,

—the joy of liberty and of an outlook wholly new. Sidwell might perchance be to him all that Janet was to Christian. Was it not the luring of 'ideals' that prompted him to turn away from his long hope?

There must be no more untruthfulness. Sidwell must have all the facts laid before her, and make her choice.

Without a clear understanding of what he was going to write, he sat down at eleven o'clock, and began, 'Dear Miss Warricombe.' Why not 'Dear Sidwell'? He took another sheet of paper.

'DEAR SIDWELL,—Tonight I can remember only your last word to me when we parted. I cannot address you coldly, as though half a stranger. Thus long I have kept silence about everything but the outward events of my life; now, in telling you of something that has happened, I must speak as I think.

'Early this evening I was surprised by a visit from Christian Moxey—a name you know. He came to tell me that his sister (she of whom I once spoke to you) was dead, and had bequeathed to me a large sum of money. He said that it represented an income of eight hundred pounds.

‘I knew nothing of Miss Moxey’s illness, and the news of her will come to me as a surprise. In word or deed, I never sought more than her simple friendship—and even *that* I believed myself to have forfeited.

‘If I were to refuse this money, it would be in consequence of a scruple which I do not in truth respect. Christian Moxey tells me that his sister’s desire was to enable me to live the life of a free man, and if I have any duty at all in the matter, surely it does not constrain me to defeat her kindness. No condition whatever is attached. The gift releases me from the necessity of leading a hopeless existence—leaves me at liberty to direct my life how I will.

‘I wish, then, to put aside all thoughts of how this opportunity came to me, and to ask you if you are willing to be my wife.

‘Though I have never written a word of love, my love is unchanged. The passionate hope of three years ago still rules my life. Is *your* love strong enough to enable you to disregard all hindrances? I cannot of course know whether, in your sight, dishonour still clings to me, or whether you understand me well enough to have forgiven and forgotten those hateful things in the past. Is it yet too soon? Do you wish

me still to wait, still to prove myself? Is your interest in the free man less than in the slave? For my life has been one of slavery and exile—exile, if you know what I mean by it, from the day of my birth.

‘Dearest, grant me this great happiness! We can live where we will. I am not rich enough to promise all the comforts and refinements to which you are accustomed, but we should be safe from sordid anxieties. We can travel; we can make a home in any European city. It would be idle to speak of the projects and ambitions that fill my mind—but surely I may do something worth doing, win some position among intellectual men of which you would not be ashamed. You yourself urged me to hope that. With you at my side—Sidwell, grant me this chance, that I may know the joy of satisfied love! I am past the age which is misled by vain fancies. I have suffered unspeakably, longed for the calm strength, the pure, steady purpose which would result to me from a happy marriage. There is no fatal divergence between our minds; did you not tell me that? You said that if I had been truthful from the first, you might have loved me with no misgiving. Forget the madness into which I was betrayed. There is no soil upon my spirit. I offer you love as noble as any man is capable of. Think—

think well—before replying to me; let your true self prevail. You *did* love me, dearest.—Yours ever,

‘GODWIN PEAK.’

At first he wrote slowly, as though engaged on a literary composition, with erasions, insertions. Facts once stated, he allowed himself to forget how Sidwell would most likely view them, and thereafter his pen hastened: fervour inspired the last paragraph. Sidwell’s image had become present to him, and exercised all—or nearly all—its old influence.

The letter must be copied, because of that laboured beginning. Copying one’s own words is at all times a disenchanting drudgery, and when the end was reached Godwin signed his name with hasty contempt. What answer could he expect to such an appeal? How vast an improbability that Sidwell would consent to profit by the gift of Marcella Moxey!

Yet how otherwise could he write? With what show of sincerity could he offer to refuse the bequest? Nay, in that case he must not *offer* to do so, but simply state the fact that his refusal was beyond recall. Logically, he had chosen the only course open to him,—for to refuse independence was impossible.

A wheezy clock in his landlady's kitchen was striking two. For very fear of having to revise his letter in the morning, he put it into its envelope, and went out to the nearest pillar-post.

That was done. Whether Sidwell answered with 'Yes' or with 'No,' he was a free man.

On the morrow he went to his work as usual, and on the day after that. The third morning might bring a reply — but did not. On the evening of the fifth day, when he came home, there lay the expected letter. He felt it; it was light and thin. That hideous choking of suspense——Well, it ran thus:

'I cannot. It is not that I am troubled by your accepting the legacy. You have every right to do so, and I know that your life will justify the hopes of her who thus befriended you. But I am too weak to take this step. To ask you to wait yet longer, would only be a fresh cowardice. You cannot know how it shames me to write this. In my very heart I believe I love you, but what is such love worth? You must despise me, and you will forget me. I live in a little world; in the greater world where your place is, you will win a love very different.

S. W.'

Godwin laughed aloud as the paper dropped from his hand.

Well, she was not the heroine of a romance. Had he expected her to leave home and kindred—the ‘little world’ so infinitely dear to her—and go forth with a man deeply dishonoured? Very young girls have been known to do such a thing; but a thoughtful mature woman——! Present, his passion had dominated her: and perhaps her nerves only. But she had had time to recover from that weakness.

A woman, like most women, of cool blood, temperate fancies. A domestic woman; the ornament of a typical English home.

Most likely it was true that the matter of the legacy did not trouble her. In any case she would not have consented to marry him, and *therefore* she knew no jealousy. Her love! why, truly, what was it worth?

(Much, much! of no less than infinite value. He knew it, but this was not the moment for such a truth.)

A cup of tea to steady the nerves. Then thoughts, planning, world-building.

He was awake all night, and Sidwell's letter lay within reach.—Did *she* sleep calmly? Had she never

stretched out her hand for *his* letter, when all was silent? There were men who would not take such a refusal. A scheme to meet her once more—the appeal of passion, face to face, heart to heart—the means of escape ready—and then the ‘greater world’——

But neither was he cast in heroic mould. He had not the self-confidence, he had not the hot, youthful blood. A critic of life, an analyst of moods and motives; not the man who dares and acts. The only important resolve he had ever carried through was a scheme of ignoble trickery—to end in frustration.

‘The greater world.’ It was a phrase that had been in his own mind once or twice since Moxey’s visit. To point him thither was doubtless the one service Sidwell could render him. And in a day or two, that phrase was all that remained to him of her letter.

On a Sunday afternoon at the end of October, Godwin once more climbed the familiar stairs at Staple Inn, and was welcomed by his friend Earwaker. The visit was by appointment. Earwaker knew all about the legacy; that it was accepted; and that Peak had only a few days to spend in London, on his way to the Continent.

‘You are regenerated,’ was his remark as Godwin entered.

‘Do I look it? Just what I feel. I have shaken off a good (or a bad) ten years.’

The speaker’s face, at all events in this moment, was no longer that of a man at hungry issue with the world. He spoke cheerily.

‘It isn’t often that fortune does a man such a kind turn. One often hears it said: If only I could begin life again with all the experience I have gained! That is what I *can* do. I can break utterly with the past, and I have learnt how to live in the future.’

‘Break utterly with the past?’

‘In the practical sense. And even morally to a great extent.’

Earwaker pushed a box of cigars across the table. Godwin accepted the offer, and began to smoke. During these moments of silence, the man of letters had been turning over a weekly paper, as if in search of some paragraph; a smile announced his discovery.

‘Here is something that will interest you—possibly you have seen it.’

He began to read aloud:

“On the 23rd inst. was celebrated at St. Bragg’s,

Torquay, the marriage of the Rev. Bruno Leathwaite Chilvers, late Rector of St. Margaret's, Exeter, and the Hon. Bertha Harriet Cecilia Jute, eldest daughter of the late Baron Jute. The ceremony was conducted by the Hon. and Rev. J. C. Jute, uncle of the bride, assisted by the Rev. F. Miller, the Very Rev. Dean Pinnock, the Rev. H. S. Crook, and the Rev. William Tomkinson. The bride was given away by Lord Jute. Mr. Horatio Dukinfield was best man. The bridal dress was of white brocade, draped with Brussels lace, the corsage being trimmed with lace and adorned with orange blossoms. The tulle veil, fastened with three diamond stars, the gifts of"—Well, shall I go on ?'

'The triumph of Chilvers!' murmured Godwin. 'I wonder whether the Hon. Bertha is past her fortieth year ?'

'A blooming beauty, I dare say. But Lord ! how many people it takes to marry a man like Chilvers ! How sacred the union must be !—Pray take a paragraph more : "The four bridesmaids—Miss—etc., etc.—wore cream *crépon* dresses trimmed with turquoise blue velvet, and hats to match. The bridegroom's presents to them were diamond and ruby brooches."'

'Chilvers *in excelsis* !—So he is no longer at Exeter ;

has no living, it seems. What does he aim at next, I wonder ?'

Earwaker cast meaning glances at his friend.

'I understand you,' said Godwin, at length. 'You mean that this merely illustrates my own ambition. Well, you are right, I confess my shame—and there's an end of it.'

He puffed at his cigar, resuming presently :

'But it would be untrue if I said that I regretted anything. Constituted as I am, there was no other way of learning my real needs and capabilities. Much in the past is hateful to me, but it all had its use. There are men—why, take your own case. You look back on life, no doubt, with calm and satisfaction.'

'Rather, with resignation.'

Godwin let his cigar fall, and laughed bitterly.

'Your resignation has kept pace with life. I was always a rebel. My good qualities—I mean what I say—have always wrecked me. Now that I haven't to fight with circumstances, they may possibly be made subservient to my happiness.'

'But what form is your happiness to take ?'

'Well, I am leaving England. On the Continent I shall make no fixed abode, but live in the places where

cosmopolitan people are to be met. I shall make friends ; with money at command, one may hope to succeed in that. Hotels, boarding-houses, and so on, offer the opportunities. It sounds oddly like the project of a swindler, doesn't it ? There's the curse I can't escape from ! Though my desires are as pure as those of any man living, I am compelled to express myself as if I were about to do something base and underhand. Simply because I have never had a social place. I am an individual merely ; I belong to no class, town, family, club'——

'Cosmopolitan people,' mused Earwaker. 'Your ideal is transformed.'

'As you know. Experience only could bring that about. I seek now only the free, intellectual people—men who have done with the old conceptions—women who'——

His voice grew husky, and he did not complete the sentence.

'I shall find them in Paris, Rome.—Earwaker, think of my being able to speak like this ! No day-dreams, but actual sober plans, their execution to begin in a day or two. Paris, Rome ! And a month ago I was a hopeless slave in a vile manufacturing town.—I wish it were possible for me to pray for the soul of that poor dead

woman. I don't speak to you of her ; but do you imagine I am brutally forgetful of her to whom I owe all this ?'

'I do you justice,' returned the other, quietly.

'I believe you can and do.'

'How grand it is to go forth as I am now going !' Godwin resumed, after a long pause. 'Nothing to hide, no shams, no pretences. Let who will inquire about me. I am an independent Englishman, with so and so much a year. In England I have one friend only—that is you. The result, you see, of all these year's savage striving to knit myself into the social fabric.'

'Well, you will invite me some day to your villa at Sorrento,' said Earwaker, encouragingly.

'That I shall !' Godwin's eyes flashed with imaginative delight. 'And before very long. Never to a home in England !'

'By-the-bye, a request. I have never had your portrait. Sit before you leave London.'

'No. I'll send you one from Paris—it will be better done.'

'But I am serious. You promise ?'

'You shall have the thing in less than a fortnight.'

The promise was kept. Earwaker received an ad-

mirable photograph, which he inserted in his album with a curious sense of satisfaction. A face by which every intelligent eye must be arrested ; which no two observers would interpret in the same way.

‘His mate must be somewhere,’ thought the man of letters, ‘but he will never find her.’

II

IN his acceptance of Sidwell's reply, Peak did not care to ask himself whether the delay of its arrival had any meaning one way or another. Decency would hardly have permitted her to answer such a letter by return of post; of course she waited a day or so.

But the interval meant more than this.

Sylvia Moorhouse was staying with her friend. The death of Mrs. Moorhouse, and the marriage of the mathematical brother, had left Sylvia homeless, though not in any distressing sense; her inclination was to wander for a year or two, and she remained in England only until the needful arrangements could be concluded.

'You had better come with me,' she said to Sidwell, as they walked together on the lawn after luncheon.

The other shook her head.

'Indeed, you had better.—What are you doing here? What are you going to make of your life?'

‘I don’t know.’

‘Precisely. Yet one ought to live on some kind of plan. I think it is time you got away from Exeter ; it seems to me you are finding its atmosphere *morbific*.’

Sidwell laughed at the allusion.

‘You know,’ she said, ‘that the reverend gentleman is shortly to be married?’

‘Oh, yes, I have heard all about it. But is he forsaking the Church?’

‘Retiring only for a time, they say.’

‘Forgive the question, Sidwell—did he honour you with a proposal?’

‘Indeed, no!’

‘Some one told me it was imminent, not long ago.’

‘Quite a mistake,’ Sidwell answered, with her grave smile. ‘Mr. Chilvers had a singular manner with women in general. It was meant, perhaps, for subtle flattery ; he may have thought it the most suitable return for the female worship he was accustomed to receive.’

Mr. Warricombe was coming towards them. He brought a new subject of conversation, and as they talked the trio drew near to the gate which led into the road. The afternoon postman was just entering ; Mr. Warricombe took from him two letters.

‘One for you, Sylvia, and—one for you, Sidwell.’

A slight change in his voice caused Sidwell to look at her father as he handed her the letter. In the same moment she recognised the writing of the address. It was Godwin Peak’s, and undoubtedly her father knew it.

With a momentary hesitation Mr. Warricombe continued his talk from the point at which he had broken off, but he avoided his daughter’s look, and Sidwell was too well aware of an uneasiness which had fallen upon him. In a few minutes he brought the chat to an end, and walked away towards the house.

Sidwell held her letter tightly. Conversation was no longer possible for her; she had a painful throbbing of the heart, and felt that her face must be playing traitor. Fortunately, Sylvia found it necessary to write a reply to the missive she had received, and her companion was soon at liberty to seek solitude.

For more than an hour she remained alone. However unemotional the contents of the letter, its arrival would have perturbed her seriously, as in the two previous instances; what she found on opening the envelope threw her into so extreme an agitation that it was long before she could subdue the anguish of disorder in all her senses. She had tried to believe that Godwin Peak was henceforth

powerless to affect her in this way, write what he would. The romance of her life was over; time had brought the solution of difficulties to which she looked forward; she recognised the inevitable, as doubtless did Godwin also. But all this was self-deception. The passionate letter delighted as much as it tortured her; in secret her heart had desired this, though reason suppressed and denied the hope. No longer need she remember with pangs of shame the last letter she had written, and the cold response; once again things were as they should be—the lover pleading before her—she with the control of his fate. The injury to her pride was healed, and in the thought that perforce she must answer with a final ‘No,’ she found at first more of solace than of distress.

Subsidence of physical suffering allowed her to forget this emotion, in its nature unavowable. She could think of the news Godwin sent, could torment herself with interpretations of Marcella Moxey’s behaviour, and view in detail the circumstances which enabled Godwin to urge a formal suit. Among her various thoughts there recurred frequently a regret that this letter had not reached her, like the other two, unobserved. Her father had now learnt that she was in correspondence with the disgraced man; to keep silence would be to cause him

grave trouble ; yet how much better if fortune had only once more favoured her, so that the story might have remained her secret, from beginning to end.

For was not this the end ?——

At the usual time she went to the drawing-room, and somehow succeeded in conversing as though nothing had disturbed her. Mr. Warricombe was not seen till dinner. When he came forth, Sidwell noticed his air of preoccupation, and that he avoided addressing her. The evening asked too much of her self-command ; she again withdrew, and only came back when the household was ready for retiring. In bidding her father good-night, she forced herself to meet his gaze ; he looked at her with troubled inquiry, and she felt her cheek redden.

‘Do you want to get rid of me?’ asked Sylvia, with wonted frankness, when her friend drew near.

‘No. Let us go to the glass-house.’

Up there on the roof Sidwell often found a retreat when her thoughts were troublesome. Fitfully, she had resumed her water-colour drawing, but as a rule her withdrawal to the glass-house was for reading or reverie. Carrying a small lamp, she led the way before Sylvia, and they sat down in the chairs which on one occasion had been occupied by Buckland Warricombe and Peak.

The wind, rarely silent in this part of Devon, blew boisterously from the south-west. A far-off whistle, that of a train speeding up the valley on its way from Plymouth, heightened the sense of retirement and quietude always to be enjoyed at night here under the stars.

‘Have you been thinking over my suggestion?’ asked Sylvia, when there had been silence awhile.

‘No,’ was the murmured reply.

‘Something has happened, I think.’

‘Yes. I should like to tell you, Sylvia, but’——

‘But’——

‘I *must* tell you! I can’t keep it in my own mind, and you are the only one’——

Sylvia was surprised at the agitation which suddenly revealed itself in her companion’s look and voice. She became serious, her eyes brightening with intellectual curiosity. Feminine expressions of sympathy were not to be expected from Miss Moorhouse; far more reassuring to Sidwell was the kind attentiveness with which her friend bent forward.

‘That letter father handed me to-day was from Mr. Peak.’

‘You hear from him?’

‘This is the third time—since he went away. At our

last meeting'—her voice dropped—'I pledged my faith to him.—Not absolutely. The future was too uncertain'——

The gleam in Sylvia's eyes grew more vivid. She was profoundly interested, and did not speak when Sidwell's voice failed.

'You never suspected this?' asked the latter, in a few moments.

'Not exactly that. What I did suspect was that Mr. Peak's departure resulted from—your rejection of him.'

'There is more to be told,' pursued Sidwell, in tremulous accents. 'You must know it all—because I need your help. No one here has learnt what took place between us. Mr. Peak did not go away on that account. But—you remember being puzzled to explain his orthodoxy in religion?'

She paused. Sylvia gave a nod, signifying much.

'He never believed as he professed,' went on Sidwell, hurriedly. 'You were justified in doubting him. He concealed the truth—pretended to champion the old faiths'——

For an instant she broke off, then hastened through a description of the circumstances which had brought about Peak's discovery. Sylvia could not restrain a smile, but it was softened by the sincere kindness of her feeling.

‘And it was after this,’ she inquired impartially, ‘that the decisive conversation between you took place?’

‘No; just before Buckland’s announcement. We met again, after that.—Does it seem incredible to you that I should have let the second meeting end as it did?’

‘I think I understand. Yes, I know you well enough to follow it. I can even guess at the defence he was able to urge.’

‘You can?’ asked Sidwell eagerly. ‘You see a possibility of his defending himself?’

‘I should conjecture that it amounted to the old proverb, “All’s fair in love and war.” And, putting aside a few moral prejudices, one can easily enough absolve him.—The fact is, I had long ago surmised that his motives in taking to such a career had more reference to this world than the next. You know, I had several long talks with him; I told you how he interested me. Now I can piece together my conclusions.’

‘Still,’ urged Sidwell, ‘you must inevitably regard him as ignoble—as guilty of base deceit. I must hide nothing from you, having told so much. Have you heard from anyone about his early life?’

‘Your mother told me some old stories.’

Sidwell made an impatient gesture. In words of force

and ardour, such as never before had been at her command, she related all she knew of Godwin's history prior to his settling at Exeter, and depicted the mood, the impulses, which, by his own confession, had led to that strange enterprise. Only by long exercise of an impassioned imagination could she thus thoroughly have identified herself with a life so remote from her own. Peak's pleading for himself was scarcely more impressive. In listening, Sylvia understood how completely Sidwell had cast off the beliefs for which her ordinary conversation seemed still to betray a tenderness.

'I know,' the speaker concluded, 'that he cannot in that first hour have come to regard me with a feeling strong enough to determine what he then undertook. It was not I as an individual, but all of us here, and the world we represented. Afterwards, he persuaded himself that he had felt love for me from the beginning. And I, I tried to believe it—because I wished it true; for his sake, and for my own. However it was, I could not harden my heart against him. A thousand considerations forbade me to allow him further hope; but I refused to listen—no, I *could* not listen. I said I would remain true to him. He went away to take up his old pursuits, and if possible to make a position for himself. It was to be

our secret. And in spite of everything, I hoped for the future.'

Silence followed, and Sidwell seemed to lose herself in distressful thought.

'And now,' asked her friend, 'what has come to pass?'

'Do you know that Miss Moxey is dead?'

'I haven't heard of it.'

'She is dead, and has left Mr. Peak a fortune.—His letter of today tells me this. And at the same time he claims my promise.'

Their eyes met. Sylvia still had the air of meditating a most interesting problem. Impossible to decide from her countenance how she regarded Sidwell's position.

'But why in the world,' she asked, 'should Marcella Moxey have left her money to Mr. Peak?'

'They were friends,' was the quick reply. 'She knew all that had befallen him, and wished to smooth his path.'

Sylvia put several more questions, and to all of them Sidwell replied with a peculiar decision, as though bent on making it clear that there was nothing remarkable in this fact of the bequest. The motive which impelled her was obscure even to her own mind, for ever since receiving the letter she had suffered harassing doubts where now she affected to have none.

‘She knew, then,’ was Sylvia’s last inquiry, ‘of the relations between you and Mr. Peak?’

‘I am not sure—but I think so. Yes, I think she must have known.’

‘From Mr. Peak himself, then?’

Sidwell was agitated.

‘Yes—I think so. But what does that matter?’

The other allowed her face to betray perplexity.

‘So much for the past,’ she said at length. ‘And now?’—

‘I have not the courage to do what I wish.’

There was a long silence.

‘About your wish,’ asked Sylvia at length, ‘you are not at all doubtful?’

‘Not for one moment.—Whether I err in my judgment of him could be proved only by time; but I know that if I were free, if I stood alone’——

She broke off and sighed.

‘It would mean, I suppose,’ said the other, ‘a rupture with your family?’

‘Father would not abandon me, but I should darken the close of his life. Buckland would utterly cast me off; mother would wish to do so.—You see, I cannot think and act simply as a woman, as a human being. I am bound to a certain sphere of life. The fact that I have outgrown

it, counts for nothing. I cannot free myself without injury to people whom I love. To act as I wish would be to outrage every rule and prejudice of the society to which I belong. You yourself—you know how you would regard me.'

Sylvia replied deliberately.

'I am seeing you in a new light, Sidwell. It takes a little time to reconstruct my conception of you.'

'You think worse of me than you did.'

'Neither better nor worse, but differently. There has been too much reserve between us. After so long a friendship, I ought to have known you more thoroughly. To tell the truth, I have thought now and then of you and Mr. Peak; that was inevitable. But I went astray; it seemed to me the most unlikely thing that you should regard him with more than a doubtful interest. I knew, of course, that he had made you his ideal, and I felt sorry for him.'

'I seemed to you unworthy?'—

'Too placid, too calmly prudent. — In plain words, Sidwell, I do think better of you.'

Sidwell smiled.

'Only to know me henceforth as the woman who did not dare to act upon her best impulses.'

'As for "best"—I can't say. I don't glorify passion, as you know; and on the other hand I have little sympathy with the people who are always crying out for self-sacrifice. I don't know whether it would be "best" to throw over your family, or to direct yourself solely with regard to their comfort.'

Sidwell broke in.

'Yes, that is the true phrase—"their comfort." No higher word should be used. That is the ideal of the life to which I have been brought up. Comfort, respectability.—And has *he* no right? If I sacrifice myself to father and mother, do I not sacrifice *him* as well? He has forfeited all claim to consideration—that is what people say. With my whole soul, I deny it! If he sinned against anyone, it was against me, and the sin ended as soon as I understood him. That episode in his life is blotted out; by what law must it condemn to imperfection the whole of his life and of my own? Yet because people will not, cannot, look at a thing in a spirit of justice, I must wrong myself and him.'

'Let us think of it more quietly,' said Sylvia, in her clear, dispassionate tones. 'You speak as though a decision must be taken at once. Where is the necessity for that? Mr. Peak is now independent. Suppose a

year or two be allowed to pass, may not things look differently?’

‘A year or two!’ exclaimed Sidwell, with impatience. ‘Nothing will be changed. What I have to contend against is unchangeable. If I guide myself by such a hope as that, the only reasonable thing would be for me to write to Mr. Peak, and ask him to wait until my father and mother are dead.’

‘Very well. On that point we are at rest, then. The step must be taken at once, or never.’

The wind roared, and for some minutes no other sound was audible. By this, all the inmates of the house save the two friends were in bed, and most likely sleeping.

‘You must think it strange,’ said Sidwell, ‘that I have chosen to tell you all this, just when the confession is most humiliating to me. I want to feel the humiliation, as one only can when another is witness of it. I wish to leave myself no excuse for the future.’

‘I’m not sure that I quite understand you. You have made up your mind to break with him?’

‘Because I am a coward.’

‘If my feeling in any matter were as strong as that, I should allow it to guide me.’

‘Because your will is stronger. You, Sylvia, would

never (in my position) have granted him that second interview. You would have known that all was at an end, and have acted upon the knowledge. I knew it, but yielded to temptation—at *his* expense. I could not let him leave me, though that would have been kindest. I held him by a promise, basely conscious that retreat was always open to me. And now I shall have earned his contempt'—

Her voice failed. Sylvia, affected by the outbreak of emotion in one whom she had always known so strong in self-command, spoke with a deeper earnestness.

'Dear, do you wish me to help you against what you call your cowardice? I cannot take it upon me to encourage you until your own will has spoken. The decision must come from yourself. Choose what course you may, I am still your friend. I have no idle prejudices, and no social bonds. You know how I wish you to come away with me; now I see only more clearly how needful it is for you to breathe new air. Yes, you have outgrown these conditions, just as your brothers have, just as Fanny will—indeed has. Take tonight to think of it. If you can decide to travel with me for a year, be frank with Mr. Peak, and ask him to wait so long—till you have made up your mind. He cannot reasonably find fault with you,

for he knows all you have to consider. Won't this be best ?'

Sidwell was long silent.

'I will go with you,' she said at last, in a low voice. 'I will ask him to grant me perfect liberty for a year.'

When she came down next morning it was Sidwell's intention to seek a private interview with her father, and make known her resolve to go abroad with Sylvia; but Mr. Warricombe anticipated her.

'Will you come to the library after breakfast, Sidwell ?' he said, on meeting her in the hall.

She interpreted his tone, and her heart misgave her. An hour later she obeyed the summons. Martin greeted her with a smile, but hardly tried to appear at ease.

'I am obliged to speak to you,' were his first words. 'The letter you had yesterday was from Mr. Peak ?'

'Yes, father.'

'Is he'—Mr. Warricombe hesitated—'in these parts again ?'

'No; in Lancashire.'

'Sidwell, I claim no right whatever to control your correspondence; but it was a shock to me to find that you are in communication with him.'

'He wrote,' Sidwell replied with difficulty, 'to let me

know of a change that has come upon his prospects. By the death of a friend, he is made independent.'

'For his own sake, I am glad to hear that. But how could it concern *you*, dear?'

She struggled to command herself.

'It was at my invitation that he wrote, father.'

Martin's face expressed grave concern.

'Sidwell! Is this right?'

She was very pale, and kept her eyes unmovingly directed just aside from her father.

'What can it mean?' Mr. Warricombe pursued, with sad remonstrance. 'Will you not take me into your confidence, Sidwell?'

'I can't speak of it,' she replied, with sudden determination. 'Least of all with you, father.'

'Least of all?—I thought we were very near to each other.'

'For that very reason, I can't speak to you of this. I *must* be left free! I am going away with Sylvia, for a year, and for so long I must be absolutely independent. Father, I entreat you not to'——

A sob checked her. She turned away, and fought against the hysterical tendency; but it was too strong to be controlled. Her father approached, beseeching her to

be more like herself. He held her in his arms, until tears had their free course, and a measure of calmness returned.

‘I can’t speak to you about it,’ she repeated, her face hidden from him. ‘I must write you a long letter, when I have gone. You shall know everything in that way.’

‘But, my dearest, I can’t let you leave us under these circumstances. This is a terrible trial to me. You cannot possibly go until we understand each other!’

‘Then I will write to you here—today or tomorrow.’

With this promise Martin was obliged to be contented, Sidwell left him, and was not seen, except by Sylvia, during the whole day.

Nor did she appear at breakfast on the morning that followed. But when this meal was over, Sylvia received a message, summoning her to the retreat on the top of the house. Here Sidwell sat in the light and warmth, a glass door wide open to the west, the rays of a brilliant sun softened by curtains which fluttered lightly in the breeze from the sea.

‘Will you read this?’ she said, holding out a sheet of notepaper on which were a few lines in her own handwriting.

It was a letter, beginning—‘I cannot.’

Sylvia perused it carefully, and stood in thought.

'After all?' were the words with which she broke silence. They were neither reproachful nor regretful, but expressed grave interest.

'In the night,' said Sidwell, 'I wrote to father, but I shall not give him the letter. Before it was finished, I knew that I must write *this*. There's no more to be said, dear. You will go abroad without me—at all events for the present.'

'If that is your resolve,' answered the other, quietly, 'I shall keep my word, and only do what I can to aid it.' She sat down shielding her eyes from the sunlight with a Japanese fan. 'After all, Sidwell, there's much to be said for a purpose formed on such a morning as this; one can't help distrusting the midnight.'

Sidwell was lying back in a low chair, her eyes turned to the woody hills on the far side of the Exe.

'There's one thing I should like to say,' her friend pursued. 'It struck me as curious that you were not at all affected, by what to me would have been the one insuperable difficulty.'

'I know what you mean—the legacy.'

'Yes. It still seems to you of no significance?'

'Of very little,' Sidwell answered wearily, letting her eyelids droop.

‘Then we won’t talk about it. From the higher point of view, I believe you are right ; but—still let it rest.’

.
In the afternoon, Sidwell penned the following lines which she enclosed in an envelope and placed on the study table, when her father was absent.

‘The long letter which I promised you, dear father, is needless. I have today sent Mr. Peak a reply which closes our correspondence. I am sure he will not write again ; if he were to do so, I should not answer.

‘I have given up my intention of going away with Sylvia. Later, perhaps, I shall wish to join her somewhere on the Continent, but by that time you will be in no concern about me.’

To this Mr. Warricombe replied only with the joyous smile which greeted his daughter at their next meeting. Mrs. Warricombe remained in ignorance of the ominous shadow which had passed over her house. At present, she was greatly interested in the coming marriage of the Rev. Bruno Chilvers, whom she tried *not* to forgive for having disappointed her secret hope.

Martin had finally driven into the background those

uneasy questionings, which at one time it seemed likely that Godwin Peak would rather accentuate than silence. With Sidwell, he could never again touch on such topics. If he were still conscious of a postponed debate, the adjournment was *sine die*. Martin rested in the faith that, without effort of his own, the mysteries of life and time would ere long be revealed to him.

III

EARWAKER spent Christmas with his relatives at Kingsmill. His father and mother both lived ; the latter very infirm, unable to leave the house ; the former a man of seventy, twisted with rheumatism, his face rugged as a countenance picked out by fancy on the trunk of a big old oak, his hands scarred and deformed with labour. Their old age was restful. The son who had made himself a 'gentleman,' and who in London sat at the tables of the high-born, the wealthy, the famous, saw to it that they lacked no comfort.

A bright, dry morning invited the old man and the young to go forth together. They walked from the suburb countrywards, and their conversation was of the time when a struggle was being made to bear the expense of those three years at Whitelaw—no bad investment, as it proved. The father spoke with a strong Midland accent,

using words of dialect by no means disagreeable to the son's ear—for dialect is a very different thing from the bestial jargon which on the lips of the London vulgar passes for English. They were laughing over some half grim reminiscence, when Earwaker became aware of two people who were approaching along the pavement, they also in merry talk. One of them he knew; it was Christian Moxey.

Too much interested in his companion to gaze about him, Christian came quite near before his eyes fell on Earwaker. Then he started with a pleasant surprise, changed instantly to something like embarrassment when he observed the aged man. Earwaker was willing to smile and go by, had the other consented; but a better impulse prevailed in both. They stopped and struck hands together.

‘My father,’ said the man of letters, quite at his ease.

Christian was equal to the occasion; he shook hands heartily with the battered toiler, then turned to the lady at his side.

‘Janet, you guess who this is.—My cousin, Earwaker, Miss Janet Moxey.’

Doubtless Janet was aware that her praises had suffered no diminution when sung by Christian to his friends.

Her eyes just fell, but in a moment were ready with their frank, intelligent smile. Earwaker experienced a pang—ever so slight—suggesting a revision of his philosophy.

They talked genially, and parted with good wishes for the New Year.

Two days later, on reaching home, Earwaker found in his letter-box a scrap of paper on which were scribbled a few barely legible lines. 'Here I am!' he at length deciphered. 'Got into Tilbury at eleven this morning. Where the devil are you? Write to Charing Cross Hotel.' No signature, but none was needed. Malkin's return from New Zealand had been signalled in advance.

That evening the erratic gentleman burst in like a whirlwind. He was the picture of health, though as far as ever from enduing the comfortable flesh which accompanies robustness in men of calmer temperament. After violent greetings, he sat down with abrupt gravity, and began to talk as if in continuance of a dialogue just interrupted.

'Now, don't let us have any misunderstanding. You will please remember that my journey to England is quite independent of what took place two years and a half ago. It has *nothing whatever* to do with those circumstances.'

Earwaker smiled.

‘I tell you,’ pursued the other, hotly, ‘that I am here to see *you*—and one or two other old friends; and to look after some business matters. You will oblige me by giving credit to my assertion!’

‘Don’t get angry. I am convinced of the truth of what you say.’

‘Very well! It’s as likely as not that, on returning to Auckland, I shall marry Miss Maccabe—of whom I have written to you. I needn’t repeat the substance of my letters. I am not in love with her, you understand, and I needn’t say that my intercourse with that family has been guided by extreme discretion. But she is a very sensible young lady. My only regret is that I didn’t know her half-a-dozen years ago, so that I could have directed her education. She might have been even more interesting than she is. But—you are at leisure, I hope, Earwaker?’

‘For an hour or two.’

‘Oh, confound it! When a friend comes back from the ends of the earth!—Yes, yes; I understand. You are a busy man; forgive my hastiness. Well now, I was going to say that I shall probably call upon Mrs. Jacox.’ He paused, and gave the listener a stern look, forbidding

misconstruction. 'Yes, I shall probably go down to Wrotham. I wish to put my relations with that family on a proper footing. Our correspondence has been very satisfactory, especially of late. The poor woman laments more sincerely her—well, let us say, her folly of two years and a half ago. She has outlived it; she regards me as a friend. Bella and Lily seem to be getting on very well indeed. That governess of theirs—we won't have any more mystery; it was I who undertook the trifling expense. A really excellent teacher, I have every reason to believe. I am told that Bella promises to be a remarkable pianist, and Lily is uncommonly strong in languages. But my interest in them is merely that of a friend; let it be understood.'

'Precisely. You didn't say whether the girls have been writing to you?'

'No, no, no! Not a line. I have exchanged letters only with their mother. Anything else would have been indiscreet. I shall be glad to see them, but my old schemes are things of the past. There is not the faintest probability that Bella has retained any recollection of me at all.'

'I daresay not,' assented Earwaker.

'You think so? Very well; I have acted wisely.'

Bella is still a child, you know—compared with a man of my age. She is seventeen and a few months; quite a child! Miss Maccabe is just one-and-twenty; the proper age. When we are married, I think I shall bring her to Europe for a year or two. Her education needs that; she will be delighted to see the old countries.'

'Have you her portrait?'

'Oh no! Things haven't got so far as that. What a hasty fellow you are, Earwaker! I told you distinctly'——

He talked till after midnight, and at leave-taking apologised profusely for wasting his friend's valuable time.

Earwaker awaited with some apprehension the result of Malkin's visit to Wrotham. But the report of what took place on that occasion was surprisingly commonplace. Weeks passed, and Malkin seldom showed himself at Staple Inn; when he did so, his talk was exclusively of Miss Maccabe; all he could be got to say of the young ladies at Wrotham was, 'Nice girls; very nice girls. I hope they'll marry well.' Two months had gone by, and already the journalist had heard by letter of his friend's intention to return to New Zealand, when, on coming home late one night, he found Malkin sitting on the steps.

‘Earwaker, I have something very serious to tell you. Give me just a quarter of an hour.’

What calamity did this tone portend? The eccentric man seated himself with slow movement. Seen by a good light, his face was not gloomy, but very grave.

‘Listen to me, old friend,’ he began, sliding forward to the edge of his chair. ‘You remember I told you that my relations with the Maccabe family had been marked throughout with extreme discretion.’

‘You impressed that upon me.’

‘Good! I have never made love to Miss Maccabe, and I doubt whether she has ever thought of me as a possible husband.’

‘Well?’

‘Don’t be impatient. I want you to grasp the fact. It is important, because—I am going to marry Bella Jacox.’

‘You don’t say so?’

‘Why not?’ cried Malkin, suddenly passing to a state of excitement. ‘What objection can you make? I tell you that I am absolutely free to choose’——

The journalist calmed him, and thereupon had to hear a glowing account of Bella’s perfections. All the feeling that Malkin had suppressed during these two months rushed forth in a flood of turbid eloquence.

‘And now,’ he concluded, ‘you will come down with me to Wrotham. I don’t mean tonight; let us say the day after tomorrow, Sunday. You remember our last joint visit! Ha, ha!’

‘Mrs. Jacox is reconciled?’

‘My dear fellow, she rejoices! A wonderful nobility in that poor little woman! She wept upon my shoulder! But you must see Bella! I shan’t take her to New Zealand, at all events not just yet. We shall travel about Europe, completing her education. Don’t you approve of that?’

On Sunday, the two travelled down into Kent. This time they were received by Lily, now a pretty, pale, half-developed girl of fifteen. In a few minutes her sister entered. Bella was charming; nervousness made her words few, and it could be seen that she was naturally thoughtful, earnest, prone to reverie; her beauty had still to ripen, and gave much promise for the years between twenty and thirty. Last of all appeared Mrs. Jacox, who blushed as she shook hands with Earwaker, and for a time was ill at ease; but her vocatives were not long restrained, and when all sat down to the tea-table she chattered away with astonishing vivacity. After tea the company was joined by a lady of middle age,

who, for about two years, had acted as governess to the girls. Earwaker formed his conclusions as to the 'trifling expense' which her services represented; but it was probably a real interest in her pupils which had induced a person of so much refinement to bear so long with the proximity of Mrs. Jacox.

'A natural question occurs to me,' remarked Earwaker, as they were returning. 'Who and what was *Mr. Jacox* ?'

'Ah! Bella was talking to me about him the other day. He must have been distinctly an interesting man. Bella had a very clear recollection of him, and she showed me two or three photographs. Engaged in some kind of commerce. I didn't seek particulars. But a remarkable man, one can't doubt.'

He resumed presently.

'Now don't suppose that this marriage entirely satisfies me. Bella has been fairly well taught, but not, you see, under my supervision. I ought to have been able to watch and direct her month by month. As it is, I shall have to begin by assailing her views on all manner of things. Religion, for example. Well, I have no religion, that's plain. I might call myself this or that for the sake of seeming respectable, but

it all comes to the same thing. I don't mind Bella going to church if she wishes, but I must teach her that there's no merit whatever in doing so. It isn't an ideal marriage, but perhaps as good as this imperfect world allows. If I have children, I can then put my educational theories to the test.'

By way of novel experience, Earwaker, not long after this, converted his study into a drawing-room, and invited the Jacox family to taste his tea and cake. With Malkin's assistance, the risky enterprise was made a great success. When Mrs. Jacox would allow her to be heard, Bella talked intelligently, and showed eager interest in the details of literary manufacture.

'O Mr. Earwaker!' cried her mother, when it was time to go. 'What a delightful afternoon you have given us! We must think of you from now as one of our very best friends. Mustn't we, Lily?'

But troubles were yet in store. Malkin was strongly opposed to a religious marriage; he wished the wedding to be at a registrar's office, and had obtained Bella's consent to this, but Mrs. Jacox would not hear of such a thing. She wept and bewailed herself. 'How *can* you think of being married like a costermonger? O Mr. Malkin, you will break my heart, indeed you

will!’ And she wrote an ejaculatory letter to Earwaker, imploring his intercession. The journalist took his friend in hand.

‘My good fellow, don’t make a fool of yourself. Women are born for one thing only, the Church of England marriage service. How can you seek to defeat the end of their existence? Give in to the inevitable. Grin and bear it.’

‘I can’t! I won’t! It shall be a runaway match! I had rather suffer the rack than go through an ordinary wedding!’

Dire was the conflict. Down at Wrotham there were floods of tears. In the end, Bella effected a compromise; the marriage was to be at a church, but in the greatest possible privacy. No carriages, no gala dresses, no invitations, no wedding feast; the bare indispensable formalities. And so it came to pass. Earwaker and the girl’s governess were the only strangers present, when, on a morning of June, Malkin and Bella were declared by the Church to be henceforth one and indivisible. The bride wore a graceful travelling costume; the bridegroom was in corresponding attire.

‘Heaven be thanked, that’s over!’ exclaimed Malkin,

as he issued from the portal. 'Bella, we have twenty-three minutes to get to the railway station. Don't cry!' he whispered to her. 'I can't stand that!'

'No, no; don't be afraid,' she whispered back. 'We have said good-bye already.'

'Capital! That was very thoughtful of you.—Good-bye, all! Shall write from Paris, Earwaker. Nineteen minutes; we shall just manage it!'

He sprang into the cab, and away it clattered.

A letter from Paris, a letter from Strasburg, from Berlin, Munich—letters about once a fortnight. From Bella also came an occasional note, a pretty contrast to the incoherent enthusiasm of her husband's compositions. Midway in September she announced their departure from a retreat in Switzerland.

'We are in the utmost excitement, for it is now decided that in three days we start for Italy! The heat has been terrific, and we have waited on what seems to me the threshold of Paradise until we could hope to enjoy the delights beyond. We go first to Milan. My husband, of course, knows Italy, but he shares my impatience. I am to entreat you to write to Milan, with as much news as possible. Especially have you heard anything more of Mr. Peak?'

November the pair spent in Rome, and thence was dispatched the following in Malkin's hand :

'This time I am *not* mistaken! I have seen Peak. He didn't see me; perhaps wouldn't have known me. It was in Piale's reading-room. I had sat down to *The Times*, when a voice behind me sounded in such a curiously reminding way that I couldn't help looking round. It was Peak; not a doubt of it. I might have been uncertain about his face, but the voice brought back that conversation at your rooms too unmistakably—long ago as it was. He was talking to an American, whom evidently he had met somewhere else, and had now recognised. "I've had a fever," he said, "and can't quite shake off the results. Been in Ischia for the last month. I'm going north to Vienna." Then the two walked away together. He looked ill, sallow, worn out. Let me know if you hear.'

On that same day, Earwaker received another letter, with the Roman post-mark. It was from Peak.

'I have had nothing particular to tell you. A month ago I thought I should never write to you again; I

got malarial fever, and lay desperately ill at the *Ospedale Internazionale* at Naples. It came of some monstrous follies there's no need to speak of. A new and valuable experience. I know what it is to look steadily into the eyes of Death.

'Even now, I am far from well. This keeps me in low spirits. The other day I was half decided to start for London. I am miserably alone, want to see a friend. What a glorious place Staple Inn seemed to me as I lay in the hospital! Proof how low I had sunk: I thought longingly of Exeter, of a certain house there—never mind!

'I write hastily. An invitation from some musical people has decided me to strike for Vienna. Up there, I shall get my health back. The people are of no account—boarding-house acquaintances—but they may lead to better. I never in my life suffered so from loneliness.'

This was the eighteenth of November. On the twenty-eighth the postman delivered a letter of an appearance which puzzled Earwaker. The stamp was Austrian, the mark 'Wien.' From Peak, therefore. But the writing was unknown, plainly that of a foreigner.

The envelope contained two sheets of paper. The one was covered with a long communication in German; on the other stood a few words of English, written, or rather scrawled, in a hand there was no recognising:

‘Ill again, and alone. If I die, act for me. Write to Mrs. Peak, Twybridge.’

Beneath was added, ‘J. E. Earwaker, Staple Inn, London.’

He turned hurriedly to the foreign writing. Earwaker read a German book as easily as an English, but German manuscript was a terror to him. And the present correspondent wrote so execrably that beyond *Geehrter Herr*, scarcely a word yielded sense to his anxious eyes. Ha! One he had made out—*gestorben*.

Crumpling the papers into his pocket, he hastened out, and knocked at the door of an acquaintance in another part of the Inn. This was a man who had probably more skill in German cursive. Between them, they extracted the essence of the letter.

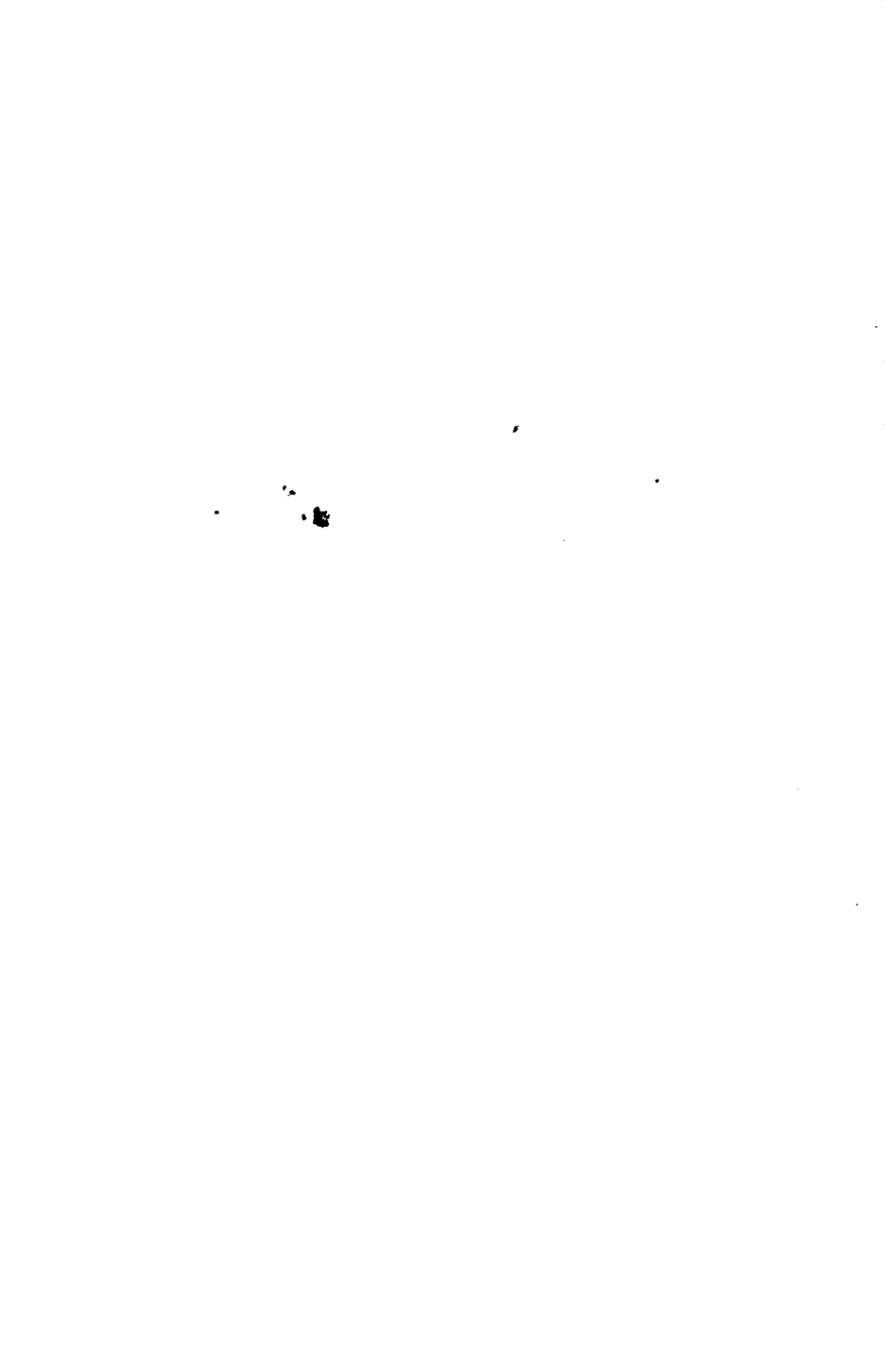
He who wrote was the landlord of an hotel in

Vienna. He reported that an English gentleman, named Peak, just arrived from Italy, had taken a bedroom at that house. In the night, the stranger became very ill, sent for a doctor, and wrote the lines enclosed, the purport whereof he at the same time explained to his attendants. On the second day Mr. Peak died. Among his effects were found circular notes, and a sum of loose money. The body was about to be interred. Probably Mr. Earwaker would receive official communications, as the British consul had been informed of the matter. To whom should *bills* be sent?

The man of letters walked slowly back to his own abode.

‘Dead, too, in exile!’ was his thought. ‘Poor old fellow!’

THE END.



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